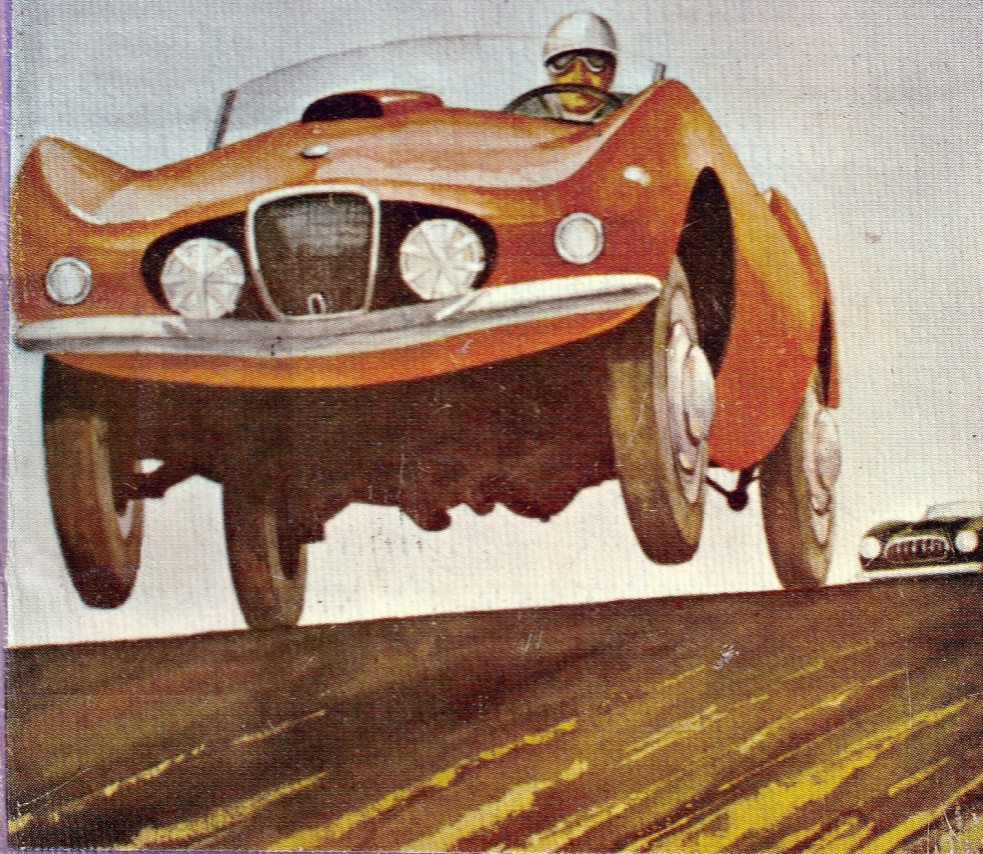


ROAD-RACE ROOKIE

William Campbell Gault



ROAD-RACE ROOKIE

by **William Campbell Gault**

author of *Two-Wheeled Thunder*, etc.

Leave the drag strip? Give up his hot rod? Not Ward Trenton! He has to admit that the Jaguars, Porsches, and MG's are mighty good to look at and even better to drive. But sports cars are for rich kids.

Then Ward has a chance to buy a Porsche. To the dismay of his old friend Juan Arragon, he persuades the members of the San Valdesto Roadster Club to allow the sports car boys to join their organization. Among the prospective new members is Whitney Sutherland Chapman, Jr., who proves to be proud, arrogant and an ace driver. Juan, who has suffered from snobbery himself, is now guilty of snobbery in reverse and stays away from the club he did so much to build.

To Ward the club is bigger than the individual members, and he does everything in his power to get Whitney Chapman, the best sports car driver in the area, and Juan Arragon, his hot-headed comrade from the hot rod wars, to become active members of the club.

How Ward overcomes his own prejudices and helps Juan and Whitney make their decisions is but part of a fast-moving, exciting story of the development of an ace hot rodder into a first-rate sports car driver.

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Road-Race Rookie
Two-Wheeled Thunder
Through the Line
Dirt Track Summer
Drag Strip
Dim Thunder
Rough Road to Glory
Bruce Benedict, Halfback
Speedway Challenge
Mr. Quarterback
Gallant Colt
Mr. Fullback
Thunder Road

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ROAD-RACE ROOKIE

chapter one

OUR WORLD had been different. We had worked up through the converted flatheads to the big Chev engines and beyond that. We had the San Valdesto Roadster Club now and the drag strip where the old airport used to be, and it was fun.

Sport cars were something else. Those Alfas and Ferraris, those Jags and Aston Martins the rich boys had, they weren't part of our world.

San Valdesto has a lot of rich boys, boys whose fathers can afford to buy them twelve-thousand-dollar roadsters. Only a couple of these boys belonged to the SVRC, and that was because they also drove rods. Bill Burnett had an MG and Len Aberg a Corvette, but they didn't compete with these on the strip. Both of them had full-house Chevs for the drags.

And then Bill Burnett petitioned the Drag Committee for permission to run a sport-car drag in con-

junction with one the rods were running on Memorial Day.

Well, we run an NHRA strip at San Valdesto, and the NHRA has a sport-car classification in its rule book. And we had boys who were sharp enough to act as a technical staff for classifying the cars. The three top classes would need roll bars and flywheel shields, and Bill agreed to inform all competitors of this requirement.

So that was my first look at the money cars in competition. It wasn't likely to make me a fan. Over the quarter-mile, from a standing start, they weren't much better than the stockers. And I'd always considered the stockers only a little better than walking.

Terry McGovern was standing next to me while we watched them. Terry's one of the founders of the club.

"Pretty sad display," I commented.

He nodded. "They weren't designed for this kind of racing. But if we laid out a course here—" He looked thoughtful.

I stared at him.

From the other side of Terry, my brother said, "Don't look so shocked, Ward. You haven't seen them at their best."

I was sure of it. A new Jag XK-E had just reached a terminal speed of 94 miles an hour, running the quarter-mile in 15.2 seconds.

I said, "I've seen chain-drive Appersons do better than that."

Terry sighed. My brother said, "Four-forty Trenton, they're starting to call you. If drags are so hot, how come they get two hundred thousand people at Indianapolis? That's no drag."

"It's no sport-car rally, either," I said. "What are we arguing about? Horses for courses. I say if you can afford one, a sport car is a lot of fun. But they're nothing to watch from a standing start, not compared with a rod."

Terry sighed again and winked at my brother.

My brother said smilingly, "Terry can afford one. He used to have one. And I'll bet right now he's thinking of buying another."

Terry nodded, only half listening. "You'll have to admit they're beautiful, Ward."

They were. Sleek and mellow, low, and loaded with power. I watched the Jag head for the staging area.

Terry said, "Ninety-four is nothing for that XK-E. I'll bet she can do a hundred and fifty without groaning."

"Probably," I admitted. "But for a quarter-mile from a standing start, you'll have to admit—"

I didn't finish. They were both laughing too hard. I couldn't see my face, but I had a feeling it was flushed. *Four-forty Trenton . . .* Ward Trenton, who thought drag racing was *all* racing. That wasn't exactly true. It was the only kind of racing I could afford.

"Get off my back," I told them, and went over to look at the Jag. Its owner was lifting the hood.

It was a sweet engine, a double-overhead-cam six. I asked him, "How big?"

"Almost thirty-eight hundred," he said. "I think it's thirty-seven hundred and eighty-one."

He was giving it to me in cubic centimeters. I said, "I meant in inches."

"Two hundred and thirty, point six," he said. "Most sport-car specs are quoted in cc's."

"I know," I said patiently, "I know. They aren't much for the first quarter-mile, are they?"

There was some belligerence in the look he gave me. He was taller than I was, but a lot thinner. He said smilingly, "They aren't really designed for this kind of going. Do you always carry a chip on your shoulder?"

He continued to smile. And after a few seconds, I managed to bring up a smile of my own. "I'm sorry. The boys have been giving me a bad time. My name's Ward Trenton." I held out a hand.

"I knew that," he said. "I know your brother Lin. You hold the modified roadster record here, don't you?"

I nodded as he shook my hand. He said, "I'm Whit Chapman, a friend of Bill Burnett's."

Whit Chapman . . . Whitney Sutherland Chapman, Jr., he meant, son of the man who had just sold the family ranch for nine million.

"I've heard of you," I admitted.

"My friends mostly call me 'Chappie,'" he said. "Sort of a silly name, isn't it? Would you like to wheel the heap?"

"I'd like to," I said, "but I have to get my coupe ready. Nice to have met you, Chappie. Welcome to the strip."

"Thank you," he said, studying me doubtfully.

I smiled again. "Your name isn't so bad. How would you like to be called Four-forty Trenton?"

"Horses for courses," he said, and waved a good-bye.

My own line, horses for courses. I had started with a gas sedan, gone to street roadster, modified roadster, and was now running an altered coupe, a big Chev engine in a deuce shell. That was my total racing background, all drag and all NHRA.

It had cost me a lot of work and quite a lot of money. Maybe even enough to buy a Jaguar, but I had spent it in small pieces, and traded equipment, and never really kept a record of expenditures. It was my life and my love; who counted the cost?

In the staging area, Pete Arragon said, "What are you frowning about? You've got the class of your field. You don't think that Palm Springs coupe is too much for you, do you?"

"I never gave it a thought, Pete," I said. "Juan's got the car that bothers me."

Pete grinned. "I'll bet he worries you." Juan was his brother, and both Arragons were charter members of the SVRC.

I said, "My brother and Terry McGovern think we should lay out a real sport-car course here."

"Why not?" he said. "There's more to racing than

rods and drags. Personally, drags are beginning to bore me."

I stared at him, and he grinned at me. *Call me Four-forty Trenton*, I thought, *and put me into orbit. Go ahead, say it; everybody else does.*

But he only grinned and winked. "Go get 'em, Ward," he said. "You're our leader."

The sport cars were through; the street roadsters were lining up. Back in the paired lines with the other coupes and sedans, Lin was standing next to my hot deuce.

"Where have you been, smiling brother?" he asked. "Hobnobbing with the millionaires?"

"With Whitney Sutherland Chapman, Jr., no less," I said. "That's a beautiful engine in that XK-E."

"Ah, yes," he agreed. "And that's a beautiful bankroll behind Whitney Sutherland Chapman, Jr. It's three notches up the social ladder just having the right to call him Chappie."

"I've made it, then," I said, "because that's what I called him. He said he knew you."

"We've met," Lin said. "He seems all right. He hasn't much more money than Bill Burnett, and Bill's all right, isn't he?"

"He certainly is." I adjusted the strap in my helmet. "Do we follow the roadsters?"

"Today, we do. I think you're going to run into tougher competition than Juan, today. Did you see that Palm Springs coupe with the Pontiac engine?"

"Not yet. Pete Arragon mentioned it. Does it scare you?"

"Not me. I'm not driving." He looked toward the front of our lines. "I guess he's paired against Juan. So fifty per cent of your troubles will be eliminated on the first run."

It was Juan who was eliminated. The Palm Springs Pontiac beat Juan's blown Dodge by only five feet, but the Pontiac had lost traction getting off the line and its recovery from that bad start had been spectacular.

I was paired against one of the Solvang Scramblers, an experienced boy in a hot Buick. For a hundred yards, I thought he was a cinch to win, getting off the line like a comet and moving easily to a two-length lead. And then my lady began to wind up, and we caught our big sister twenty yards short of the finish, to win by a nose.

The word came back from the trap over the PA as I chugged down the return lane. I had reached a terminal speed of 120.32 miles an hour. As we sauntered past the pit area, Whitney Sutherland (Chappie) Chapman lifted a hand in salute. He stood next to his gleaming Jaguar which had touched 94, 26 mph short of my speed.

But I knew this proved nothing; on any track with more than two turns, his Jag would cream my lady.

In our pit, Lin said, "Close one. I thought you weren't going to come through."

"I did, too. I wonder what Chapman paid for that car of his."

"Too much," my brother said. "We could make a better one than that." He paused to study me. "Terry and I didn't mean to needle you. Terry thought maybe we went too far."

I shook my head. "I'm used to it. You boys were kidding about laying out a sport-car course here, weren't you?"

"It was Terry's idea. I don't know if he was serious or not. Let's get ready for your next run." He lifted the hood.

There was nothing he was going to change under there; I had a feeling he didn't want to talk about sport cars. Or, as their drivers call them, *sports* cars.

Why should my own brother be evasive with me? Was I so sensitive?

"Put the hood down and look at me," I said. "What's going on?"

He lowered the hood slowly and grinned at me, though I thought he was slightly embarrassed. Finally, he said, "Well, Ward, you're our leader, right? You're our president. And the best man over a quarter-mile that the club has?"

"I'm the president of the club," I admitted. "The rest is only your opinion. Go on."

"Well, we got to talking about sports cars, Terry and I. And he said he knew you'd be against them, because you were old—well, Four-forty Trenton—?"

"I'm not against them! Why should I be against them?"

Lin cleared his throat and looked away. He looked back. "You wouldn't be a cinch winner any more, not over *that* route."

"I was never a *cinch* winner, not over any route. What makes him think I wouldn't win my share?"

Lin shrugged.

"Oh, boy!" I said. "My brother and my buddy—they sure have a strange opinion of me."

He sighed. "Let's go—they're lining up."

My second test was a Ventura coupe I'd run against before. He had never beaten me. He almost did today. I was still annoyed at Terry's judgment of me; I bottomed early and started to spin.

Cool, cool, cool, now, I told myself. This was no place for anger. The rear wheels found traction and my lady jumped, and we were narrowing the gap to the Ventura coupe.

We nipped him just before the line at an elapsed time that would have lost the first race. And we had earned the right to go up against the car they all feared, the Pontiac from Palm Springs.

I went over to the water jug to get a cool glass of mountain water, and who should still be around but Whitney Sutherland Chapman, Jr.

He said, "That was a close one. You wouldn't have beaten the Pontiac with that time."

"Right," I admitted.

"Think you'll beat him?" he asked.

I shrugged.

He smiled. "You *know* you will. You're a confident man, aren't you?"

I shook my head. "It's a matter of equipment and experience. I think I have the car to beat him." I drank a glass of water.

"This kind of racing is about ninety per cent car and ten per cent driver skill, isn't it?"

I shrugged again. And asked, "Have you ever tried it in a rod?"

"I never had a rod," he said. "My first car was a Porsche."

"My first car," I said, "was a thirty-five dollar Chev. It's a big world, isn't it?"

He studied me for a few seconds in that way he had, and then he smiled once more. "Good luck with the Pontiac," he said, and walked away.

Ten per cent skill. . . . Huh! He had a lot to learn.

Two straight wins and I was scowling. And why? Because Lin and Terry had needled me? They had done that before. Because Whit Chapman had all that money? He hadn't stolen a nickel of it from me.

All right, I had won too often and sometimes too easily, and quite often because of Lin. Lin was the finest mechanic in the SVRC; my car had always been tuned to its top potential because of him. But the few times he had driven the car, he had lost. So was a drag ninety per cent car and ten per cent driver?

If that was true, it was a very important ten per cent.

I went back to the car, where Lin was talking with Pete Arragon.

Pete was saying, "—and Juan will never go for it. Juan's all for the rods—" He looked up, saw me, and stopped talking.

I said nothing; the lines were forming and we were due to run against the Pontiac in the finals of our class.

I remembered the bad start the car had made against Juan, but it had still managed to come through for the win. It was clear the Palm Springs boy had all he needed under that hood. It would be my toughest test of the day.

Waiting, I looked around at all the first-class equipment and at the serious, knowing lads who had put these thunder-wagons together. We had come a long way from the highway hoodlums with their chromed murder-chariots, from the boys with the freak haircuts and frightening traffic records.

We had put speed where it belonged, on the drag strip, in this county. The San Valdesto Roadster Club had been officially commended by the county sheriff's department for a thirty per cent decrease in juvenile traffic fatalities. We had been the host club for a National Drag.

And now were we going to turn it over to the rich boys with their foreign-made toys?

I was climbing into the coupe when Juan came

over. "Amigo," he said, "have you heard the rumors?"

"About the sports cars?" I nodded. "We'll talk about it later, Juan. Right now, I can only think of that Pontiac."

"Sure." He smiled. "Can we fight our own brothers?"

"We can show them the light," I said. "We're older."

"That we are." He sighed. "But, amigo, I think they're brighter." He patted my shoulder. "Go out and win for us. You're our champ."

A Solvang Scrambler had already nailed down the cup in the street-roadster class, and a boy from Bakersfield was a cinch to take the top eliminator with his dragster. Our only chance at a cup today depended on the luck of yours truly, Four-forty Trenton.

"Go," Juan said again. "Go out and win for us."

We were almost on the line. I nodded, and Juan waved and went back behind the rope and the Palm Springs lad looked over and grinned. I nodded to him. He seemed confident.

One more, I thought, *one more*. . . . With luck, another cup for the shelves and there were a lot of cups there already, all earned from a standing start over the quarter-mile.

Ninety per cent car and ten per cent driver? That Pontiac had more horses than I could summon; we would see.

The first fifty yards were the important yards,

getting off the line with enough spin for rolling traction from those big slicks, but I was wary of unleashing all those anxious horses too early.

My opponent had started badly against Juan and wasn't likely to make that same mistake again.

The starter was checking with the finish-line stand now, and then he turned our way as we came up to the line. There was some tremble in my right knee, but it could have been caused by the beat of that big engine.

We were both watching the starter's flag now, ready to move out at the first inch of its drop.

It fell—we moved out nose to nose, one wide car, rubber squealing, engines growling, neither car showing any initial advantage.

Right up to the shift it was a dead heat, and I remembered how the Pontiac had caught Juan after a bad start. Without an advantage here, how could I hope to win against a car with that finishing speed?

I took a chance and shifted early.

His momentum carried him past through my shift and he had an edge, finally; the beginning of a small fear began to grow in me. I hadn't lost enough lately to develop a taste for it.

We were at full throttle now—and he still had the edge.

And then he shifted. He didn't have it perfectly synchronized; in that second of hesitation before second gear meshed, my Chev was under full acceleration once more and really blasting.

We moved past to a five-foot lead, and retained two precious feet of it all the way to the finish line.

Four-forty Trenton had won another cup, but for some reason it didn't seem as important as it once seemed.

chapter two

AS YOU PROBABLY realize by this time, San Valdesto is in California. One of the campuses of the University of California is in our town, and both Lin and I were students there.

So was Terry McGovern, though most of his other friends had gone back East, to the Ivy League schools. I saw Terry on the campus the Monday after our drag. He was standing in front of the library, talking with Len Aberg.

As I came closer, Len said, "Here's our president now. Let's get his reaction."

"To sports-car races?" I asked.

Terry nodded. "Juan's against them. And if it hadn't been for Juan, there never would have been a San Valdesto Roadster Club. So his opposition is bound to carry weight."

"You were a charter member, too," I reminded him. "What's your opinion?"

"I haven't any—*yet*," he said. "I had a sports car

when I first met Juan. But I sold it about the time we founded the club. I haven't been interested in them very much since then."

Len said, "Ward, you still haven't given us your opinion."

"It's—an expensive game," I said. "Winning cars cost money in that field."

Terry agreed with a nod. Len said, "We'd still have drag races for the rods. Because we sponsor races, it doesn't follow that all our members have to take part in them."

That was true enough. I asked, "You plan to race that Corvette, Len?"

"Nope. I'm getting a new Porsche for my birthday."

Terry laughed. "I see your angle now. And Bill Burnett's going to race his MG?"

Len shrugged.

Terry said, "Now all we need is for the other members to have birthdays—and rich fathers—and our problem is solved."

"Off my back," Len said. "My father isn't rich—he's understanding." He looked thoughtfully at me. "You don't seem dead set against the idea, Ward. I had a feeling you would be."

I met his stare. "Why should I be?"

He shrugged again.

Terry said, "Len and Bill and some others have this sports-car club, you see, but it isn't doing so well. So now they'd like to join the SVRC and use that airport that we use for the strip."

Len said stiffly, "That was worded wrong. You made us sound pretty raw, Terry."

"No offense meant," Terry said. "I only learned about this club of yours last night, Len. Until *then*, I favored sports-car participation at *our* strip."

A silence, and somebody had to fill it. I said, "I have a class now. We have a directors' meeting tonight, Terry, and you can bring the whole thing up for discussion." I winked at him. "And be nice to Len. He has a rod, too, you know."

"Not for long," Len said. "I'm selling it."

It was his car to sell; why did I resent the act? I went to my econ lecture and tried to concentrate, to take notes, to forget about the tiny feud apparently beginning to grow in the SVRC.

Don't be oppressively middle-class, Four-forty Trenton, I warned myself. If you had the money to buy a Jag, you'd be on Len's side, on Bill Burnett's side, on the side of Whitney Sutherland Chapman, Jr.

But we had a fine gang in the club: boys from the wrong side of the tracks, like Juan and Pete Arragon, rich kids like Bill and Len, and all the social levels in between.

We had a sport in common—and something else. We had all built or rebuilt our own machines. Not only money had gone into them; hard, grinding, knuckle-skinning, muscle-stretching, red-eyed hours of labor had gone into them too. At the rod level, we were all laborers.

Juan and Pete and Terry McGovern and some

fellows no longer living in this town had worked on a garbage and refuse truck one summer to earn the money to found this club. They had impressed their employer, Mr. Calvano, and he had bought the deserted airport area for a dump and leased the strip to them. He still has the refreshment concession there.

Maybe I was an inverse, middle-class snob, but the sports-car boys I had seen around town hadn't looked like *our* kind of people to me. Papa had bought them the cars, and mama paid the traffic fines so papa wouldn't take the cars away from these superior brats.

"A rather regrettable illustration of planned obsolescence in our society," Professor Ellerbe was saying, "is the American motor-car industry—"

I came back to the here and now, to my notebook and the lecture room.

Professor Ellerge paused, to make his little joke. "A production stimulant I resist with my Volkswagen."

A small laugh, but it had been a small joke.

Planned obsolescence, another jibe at Detroit that came from the sports-car buffs. . . . But the boys with the more indulgent fathers bought new sports cars every year. Or *sport* cars, as I used to call them. And everybody else, until the fad grew larger.

Professor Ellerbe's eyes were roaming the room as he talked, and I thought his gaze rested on me

longer than was necessary. *Personal?* I shook myself and closed the notebook.

The lecture was over; as we filed out Bill Burnett came over to walk along with me. He was grinning.

"How did you like that planned obsolescence bit, Ward? Strike home?"

I said, "My coupe, which *won* yesterday, is exactly thirty years old. Is it obsolete?"

"The body is old," Bill conceded. "And the engine—?"

"Is a six-year-old Chev truck engine," I said. "That's older than Professor Ellerbe's puddle-jumper."

Bill laughed. "All-American Trenton! You kill me—"

"Thank you. I might. Yesterday I was Forty Trenton. The new name's an improvement over that. Thank you, again."

He put a hand on my shoulder. "Hey, Ward, you sound bitter. 'What's wrong?'"

I took a deep breath and a moment of thought. And finally said, "I wish I knew. It's kind of mixed up with *earning* superiority, instead of *buying* it. Part of it is thinking of a going club in a sympathetic town being taken over by spoiled kids in berets and silly caps. I don't know what's wrong, but I have a feeling I'll learn what it is after it's happened."

"Oh, boy!" he said. "Ward Trenton coming to

the defense of Detroit, you who scornfully called them 'Detroit jewels,' and called them overweight and underengineered and chrome-plated monsters. Oh, man—!"

"Detroit," I said stiffly, "Is not America. The Duesenbergs were not operating there, nor Colonel Howard Marmon. Nor is Offenhauser, or Meyer-Drake, or—"

"You're talking ancient history," Bill said easily, "except for Meyer-Drake—and the way that Cooper finished at Indianapolis last year, maybe even Meyer-Drake is no longer king. Ward, as a sociology major, I think I understand your problem."

"I'm waiting to hear your judgment," I said. "Patiently."

He clapped my back in farewell. "You're class-conscious. That's un-American, Ward. See you tonight." He waved and was lost in the crowd of students in the corridor.

See me tonight? At the directors' meeting of the SVRC, he meant. But he wasn't a director; what would he be doing there? Then I remembered—there would also be an open meeting.

I had a hunch there would be other sports-car drivers there; they were probably going to make a mass attack before the defenses could get organized.

Yesterday, Terry McGovern had favored them. But last night he had learned about this other club which had failed. I had a feeling that Terry was on Juan's side now. He could understand *our* members wanting to organize a sports-car branch; this new

move looked like pressure from *outside*. He would resist that.

I had no classes after two o'clock; I went to the students' union to wait for Lin. We were too far from school to walk home and I had the car. I sat in a quiet corner and tried to guess how the board members would line up on the sports-car proposal if it was brought to a vote tonight.

Juan was on that Board; his vote would undoubtedly be negative. Terry McGovern had been annoyed by the pressure tactics of his friend, but Terry would always be open to a reasonable argument. I was the third member; with Juan I could stop any sports-car participation of the SVRC.

Unless two-thirds of the membership asked that the question be put to a direct membership vote, the board was authorized to decide on all questions of general policy.

Neither Juan nor I were adept at playing politics, nor were we particularly interested in the art. I had been elected president because of a few victories here and there; Juan was an officer because he had founded the club with Terry McGovern, and both of them were solid, level-headed, hard-working rodders.

Terry could afford a sports car; so could Burnett and Len Aberg. But how many others in the club could? Not many.

A voice said, "What are you plotting now?" and I looked up to see Lin standing next to my chair.

"I'm thinking," I told him, "not plotting. You're

early." I stood up and we started to walk to the car. "What are you thinking?" he asked.

"About the board meeting tonight. We don't have enough members who can afford sports cars."

"Not according to FIA specifications, probably," he said. "But who follows the FIA formula in America?"

"And what," I asked, "is the FIA? Remember, I'm Four-forty Trenton, and I only know my own field."

Lin smiled. "My French isn't the best, but I think FIA means *Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile*. Then the Sports Car Club of America has its rules, and so has the California Sports Car Club. So, what's a sports car?"

"The NHRA has them classified for drags."

"Drags," Lin said scornfully. "Who wants to watch sports cars in *drags*?"

"All right, all right," I said impatiently. "So the big question still remains—who in the club can afford them?"

We climbed into our ancient Plymouth, and Lin said, "I guess almost all of us can afford Formula Junior cars, if we sell our rods."

Formula Junior . . . ? I didn't ask him what *that* meant; he was smug enough already.

We rode in silence. I was thinking of yesterday, and how I had resented the boys' implying I would fight the sports-car suggestion. And now, with no discussion on it, I had been planning to go into tonight's meeting with my mind made up.

My dad was watering the lawn in front when we drove in, and he called to me, "Juan phoned. He wants you to phone him back before the meeting."

"Thanks, Dad," I called—and looked over to see Lin smiling.

"What's funny?" I asked.

"The Old Guard," he said lightly. "Juan and Ward against Terry McGovern and Terry's rich friends. Those poor little rich kids—"

"I have an open mind," I said, "and so has Juan. We haven't decided anything yet."

"Good," Lin said. "Because I have a hunch if the board of directors didn't vote for the sports cars, a membership vote might be pushed through. Just a rumor—don't quote me."

I stared at him. "It would fail. That would require a two-thirds majority, to force it to a membership vote."

Lin shrugged and stepped from the car. He was reaching into the back seat for his books when I asked, "Have you been sounding out the boys on this?"

He straightened and looked at me candidly. "No. But there's been a lot of talk about it. Most of the members know you and Juan are strictly for drags. They didn't figure you'd let the playboys in."

Nothing hurts like the truth, and Lin had come close to it. I said, "We'll see, tonight."

I phoned Juan, but he wasn't home. Pete was home though, and he told me, "Juan thought the

directors' meeting should be a half-hour earlier. The membership meeting's at eight, and Juan thought you and Terry should be at the garage at seven."

"Okay." I paused. "What is it, Pete—mutiny in the ranks?"

He laughed. He was a great laugher. "Progress, Ward. Keep your mind open."

It seemed clear to me now that a lot had been going on, and I hadn't even guessed at it until yesterday. The opposition was organized, and they would have support from that defunct sports-car club. There would be no reason to keep the members of that club out of ours; once they were in, they'd add enough new members to give their views majority status.

I didn't intend to fight progress, but I'd fight any outsiders who threatened to change the democratic, friendly atmosphere of the San Valdesto Roadster Club.

The combination clubhouse and garage was a converted warehouse in the low-rent district of our town. It had cost the original six members ten dollars a month each for rent, but the rent hadn't increased and the membership had. It cost each member less than a dollar a month, now.

For the drag strip, we only paid token rent because Mr. Calvano made enough money from the food and soft drinks at our meets to more than pay his taxes. And he appreciated the job we had done in interesting *all* kinds of boys in our work.

In a sense, we were wasting a large section of the airport. There were over two and a quarter miles of strip, and we used only about a mile of it. A tricky sports-car course could be laid out there easily.

At a few minutes before seven, when I pulled up in front of the club garage, Terry McGovern was just getting out of his car. He waited for me.

He was smiling. "You're looking owly, Ward. Did you suggest this panic meeting to Juan?"

"Not guilty," I said. "What does Formula Junior mean?"

He shrugged. "Technically, I don't know. But the ones I've seen have all been around a thousand cubic centimeters of displacement. That's an awful small engine, Ward."

"That's a lawn-mower engine! Man, that's about sixty-two cubic inches!"

"So—? They move, those little bugs. I saw a Dagrada the other day I'd like to own—but it was kind of expensive."

"How expensive?"

"Around six thousand."

I said scornfully, "Are you telling me that a *toy* like that costs six thousand dollars?"

"It's not a toy, it's a bomb." He paused. "Ward, nobody wants to ruin the club, and that includes the new boys. Let's take our time and listen to their ideas."

Juan was waiting for us inside. He looked stormy.

Juan has a temper and the muscles to make his bad moods dangerous.

I grinned at him and said, "I'm glad we're friends, and I'm not driving a Porsche."

"Huh!" he said. "I just learned this afternoon that those punks went to Mr. Calvano."

"Punks—?" Terry asked quietly. "What punks?" "Chapman and Burnett and their playboy friends."

"They're not punks," Terry said. "They're friends of mine, Juan."

Juan's chin lifted and his muscles seemed to bulge. He was being the professional poor boy, now, and I feared his next words.

So I said quickly, "Easy, Juan. We're all friends, the three of us, right here now. Let us not forget *that!*"

He glanced at me, took a deep breath, and glared at Terry.

I went on, the man in the middle, a new role for me. I said, "Mr. Calvano would make a lot more on his hot dogs from a sports-car audience than he does with our gang. He's been nice to us, and if he can make some more money through us, we should include that in our considerations."

He was still glaring at Terry, one of his best friends. He said, "This was never a rich boys' club."

"Nor a poor boys'," I reminded him, "nor a middle-class club. Let's not get on a class-warfare kick, Juan. Let's stay with the issues at hand."

"That's the issue," he said. "Who but a rich boy can afford a Maserati?"

Terry answered for me. He said, "When did we ever decide how much our members must pay for their cars? Bringing the sports-car boys in shouldn't drive the rodders out, Juan. You're not making sense."

Juan took another deep breath. He and Terry had been good friends for a long time, and I was glad of that at the moment.

I said, "I'm sure I could buy a used Porsche for the money I have in my coupe. That is, if I had any urge to try that silly kind of racing. But remember, when this club was formed, Juan, you were the boy who favored the name 'roadster' instead of rod." I smiled. "At least, that's what Pete told me. And that leaves the door open for our over-privileged friends."

Terry laughed. Juan glared.

I said, "Last man to smile buys the Cokes."

Juan continued to glare. Terry said, "I'll buy." He went over to the Coke machine near the door.

Juan said quietly, "I thought you were on my side."

"How do you know I'm not? I don't like this professional poor-boy attitude you come up with from time to time, that's all. You name me three nicer guys than Bill Burnett, Len Aberg or Terry McGovern."

"All right," he said impatiently. "All right, all right! So, I'm class-conscious. Aren't you?"

"Sure, but I fight it." I lowered my voice. "Juan, you name me *one* nicer guy than Terry McGovern."

"All right!" he said for the fourth time. "You've made your point." He glanced at the Coke machine where Terry was taking out the third bottle. He asked, in a near-whisper, "How are you going to vote?"

I had come in here believing as Juan believed. But listening to him had made me realize how prejudiced my attitude had been. Now, I said, "I don't really know. I think we should hold off any board decision until we sound out the boys at the membership meeting."

"What about this delegation from the sports-car club that died? They want a hearing tonight. That's the decision I'm talking about. Do we listen to them?"

"Of course," I said. "How can we decide anything until we hear their story?"

Juan stared. "Man, what a change! You've been listening to Terry, haven't you?"

I laughed and put a hand on his big shoulder. "No, Juan—I've been listening to you."

chapter three

WE TOOK care of the other board business then, and a few of the members began to drift in to set up the chairs at the cleared end of the garage.

Juan quietly went to help with this, nodding to the greetings of the various members, absorbed and frowning. He could be a rock when his mind was made up, and I hoped he would be able to control his temper if the arguments grew heated.

From outside came the sound of a lightly muffled engine; one of the sports-car boys was arriving. It was Bill Burnett, and he had brought a friend. Whit Chapman was with him.

Juan looked up to see them in the doorway and glanced at me. I smiled at Juan and went over to the doorway.

Bill said, "I guess you two have met, haven't you?"

I nodded, and held out a hand to Chapman. "Glad to see you again."

He had a very strong grip for a thin man.

Bill said, "Juan looks annoyed. Is he?"

"He's—not happy, I guess. How many boys from that defunct club are coming?"

Chapman smiled in his cool way; Bill frowned.

"I want to know how many extra chairs to set up,"

I explained. I returned Chapman's smile. "Nothing personal."

"Of course not," he said. "There'll be about ten boys from the defunct club. We've already talked with Mr. Calvano."

"I know," I said. And asked, "What did he tell you?"

Whitney Sutherland Chapman, Jr. sighed and admitted, "He wouldn't give us any satisfaction at all. He said you boys were the ones who determined who and what raced on that strip." His chin lifted. "We now throw ourselves on your mercy."

"Ten strong," I added, "with the aid of friends from the inside. Well, we'll see—" I went back to help with the chairs.

Juan was working the same row, and he asked quietly, "What's the word?"

"Mr. Calvano turned them down. He said we decided who and what raced there."

For the first time that evening, Juan smiled. "We're in," he said. "The battle is won."

I said nothing.

"Right—?" he asked.

I shrugged.

He had an unfolded chair in his hand. He set it

down carefully and looked at me. "Amigo—what are you thinking?"

"I think we should listen to the opposition before we decide anything."

"Oh—? You think there's a possibility the boys with the berets would be good for this club?"

"Maybe? Why not? I haven't seen any wearing berets yet, Juan."

"All right, then, we'll call them the playboys. They—"

From the row behind, Pete Arragon must have been listening. He said jokingly, "Call them the rich boys, the boys from the right side of the tracks. That's what's *really* bugging Juan."

Juan stared at his brother, his big body stiff and motionless.

"Temper, temper!" Pete said. "Shape up, Juan. Be *honest!*"

"It's not that at all," Juan said evenly. "Terry McGovern is one of my best and oldest friends. And so is Bill Burnett. This *club*, that's *all* I'm thinking about in this."

"The same rules still apply to new members," I pointed out. "Two moving traffic violations in the same year and a member is automatically expelled from the club. That should make the playboys less playful. Juan, let's keep our minds open. Is that too much to ask?"

"It's too much to expect from Juan," Pete said. He walked away.

Juan stared after him, and then his gaze came

back to lock mine. "It's not too much to ask," he said. "You do the same."

Juan Arragon had been the first president of this club, and Terry McGovern its first secretary. There hadn't been any need for a treasurer then; there was no treasury. Today we were solvent, despite all the money we had spent to make a strip out of that deserted airport. But what had Mr. Calvano gained? It was his property.

I had read about a few sports-car meets and the crowds they had attracted in this area. Though the drivers were amateurs and didn't race for money, *somebody* must have made money at those meets. Why couldn't we do the same for Mr. Calvano—and the club?

The boys were coming in steadily now, and there were at least half a dozen new faces. I stopped unfolding chairs and went to wash my hands; I would be opening the meeting soon.

At the front of the room, Len Aberg was waiting for me. He said, "I guess you know about the new boys who are here and why they're here."

I nodded.

"I've been—elected their spokesman, sort of," Len went on. "I understand you and Terry and Juan didn't come to any decision at the directors' meeting."

"We came to one decision," I corrected him. "We decided to hear your story."

"Great! Could I be recognized from the floor then, to make our appeal?"

"Of course. Len—I know you have a temper, so—well, take it easy on Juan, won't you? We don't want too much friction about this, you understand."

"I'll be a saint," Len promised. "You'll be proud of me, chief." He grinned and went toward the last row, where the new faces were.

Five minutes later, when I opened the meeting, almost every chair was occupied. The minutes, correspondence, and old business were quickly disposed of and then, under new business, I recognized Len Aberg on the floor.

Len is a clear and persuasive speaker and he stated the sports-car proposal well. In order to use the full two and a quarter miles of air strip for road racing, some new blacktop would have to be laid, and the cost of that would be assessed only against the sports-car owners. They would be paid back out of admission fees from the first meet.

He paused and looked directly at me. "I understand that a membership meeting is not the place to bring this proposal. It should have been presented at the board of directors' meeting. They have the authority to pass on our petition without consulting the members. They have been generous enough to let me outline our plans to all of you. Thank you."

He sat down. There was a trickle of applause. I looked over to see Juan's stony face. I asked, "Any discussion?"

Pete Arragon raised his hand and I recognized him. As he rose to speak, Juan swiveled in his chair

to stare at him. Pete smiled at Juan and turned to face his audience.

He said, "If two-thirds of the club members support this proposal, it won't need to go to a board of directors' vote. And I'm sure two-thirds of the members are for it. I ask for the president to call for a vote right now."

Juan glared, and a murmur ran through the room.

I said, "You're out of order, Pete. According to our bylaws, a proposal can only be passed on by the membership *after* the board has refused to consider it or turned it down."

Pete sat down and I asked, "Further discussion?"

Bill Burnett raised his hands and I recognized him.

He said, "If Pete is right, and most of the members support this proposal, wouldn't the board logically be expected to reflect the members' wishes?" He paused. "Or is there some *personal* reason why we might not find favor with the board?"

Ouch. . . . I had warned Len but not Bill about antagonizing Juan. I glanced fearfully at Juan and saw his hand was raised.

Bill saw the raised hand, too, and said, "I surrender the floor to our secretary."

Juan was in the front row. When he stood up and turned, he was facing them all. His voice was low and strained. "There is a *personal* reason, and I'm it." His head was high, his back stiff and straight. "I haven't compared them, but I'd be willing to match this club's traffic record with that of any

sports-car club in this or any other town. We have *rules* about that. The organized rodders in this country have come of age. From what I've seen around this town, I don't think that can be said about the sports-car punks."

Punks. . . . He had to say *punks*. A murmur ran through the room, and I rapped for order. I said, "Juan, I want you to withdraw that last word."

He stared at me for a few seconds and then said, "I withdraw it—with my mouth. The chair can't rule on what I *think*."

"Brother, brother—," Pete muttered, and there was some laughter.

I said stiffly, "I apologize to our guests tonight for the secretary's language. He knows, as I know, that any new members coming in are subject to the same rules as the present members. Two moving traffic violations in any year will cause a member's automatic expulsion."

Juan was seated again, and I asked, "Further discussion?"

Bill Burnett raised a hand and said, "Question?" I nodded.

He asked, "When is the next board meeting?"

"In two weeks," I said, "though I can call an emergency meeting at any time if I think the business to be discussed is urgent."

"Could you call one at the close of this meeting?" Bill asked.

I nodded. "If we had urgent business, but we don't."

Bill was smiling. "Does that mean you're on Juan's side?"

I said coolly, "The question is out of order."

His voice was equally cool. "I withdraw it. Thank you, Mr. President."

A wave of muffled laughter, and next to Bill, Whitney Sutherland Chapman, Jr. sat in his superior way, enjoying it all. A Juan-like flash of anger moved through me. What superiority had he ever *earned*? Everything he had, papa had bought for him.

Terry McGovern raised a hand, and I recognized him.

Here was a man admired on both sides of the tracks. He told that suddenly quiet group: "There have been some rough and unnecessary words voiced here tonight. This is a strong and community-respected club, and it wouldn't have existed except for Juan Arragon. As a founder, I assure you that's true. To my friends who are not members, I want to explain carefully that it is not a social club or a country club, and any prospective member who decides to join had better also decide to abide by the laws and respect the spirit that gave it strength. I think I can safely say there will be no board consideration of this sports-car proposal tonight. And it will not go to a membership vote *until* and *unless* it is turned down by the board. Thank you." He sat down.

A silence, no hand raised.

I said, "I guess we're all adults. Those who aren't may leave at any time. Those who are might stay for the refreshments and an informal discussion of this new proposal. I will welcome a motion to adjourn the regular meeting."

A motion and second was offered; a show of hands, and the business meeting was adjourned.

At the long table near the hoist, Pete Arragon and Flip Donovan were taking the hot dogs out of the infra-red oven Juan had designed, and the Cokes out of the iced tubs.

Flip said, "I guess old Terry cleared the air, didn't he? His buddies would make a tennis club out of this garage."

I told him, "No lip, tonight, Irish. We have enough friction already."

He grinned. "Don't be stuffy, Ward. Anybody who can't take a little lip doesn't belong in this gang."

Next to me, a voice said, "Introduce me to your friend, Ward."

I turned to see Whit Chapman standing there. I said, "Whit Chapman, Flip Donovan. I guess you know Pete."

He nodded, as they shook hands. Flip said, "That's your Jag outside, right? XK-E, right?"

"On both counts," Whit admitted. "Do only members get hot dogs?"

"Members and Jag drivers," Flip said. "Stand where you are; I'll bring you one. Coke, too?"

Chapman nodded. "And no mustard on the dog."

Flip went to the other end of the table, and Chapman looked at me. "Bad start tonight, wasn't it? Terry sure thinks a lot of you fellows."

"We think a lot of him," I said. "I guess you know Terry had a sports car before he joined this club, a Woestman-Ebbert that would have creamed that new Jag of yours."

He shook his head. "No, it wouldn't. I've seen those Hollywood glamour pots. They're all right for the freeway; they wouldn't last five minutes in a road race."

Flip was back now, with the dog. He said, "That's right, Ward. That was an assembled job."

"So's my deuce," I said.

"And in a road race," Whit said, "that car of mine would lap you every third lap." He used my line then. "Nothing personal. If you were driving the Jaguar, you'd do the same."

"Is an airport run called a *road race*?" I asked. "I thought a road race was run on a road—or roads."

"We don't have a road, or roads," he said. He took a bite of his hot dog and a swig of Coke.

Flip said, "That's why they need us, Ward. For their big Fourth-of-July road race. And that's only a month from now." He grinned. "So it looks like they're dead, doesn't it? Terry isn't going to pressure Juan, not after tonight's fiasco."

Chapman looked at him in surprise. "Who told you about that Fourth-of-July race?"

"I work at the print shop that made your posters," Flip told him. "You boys were certainly optimistic."

Chapman smiled and chewed his hot dog. He was a hard man to ruffle.

I said, "I can call an emergency meeting of the board. I had no idea you boys had already invested money in promotion."

"Don't give it a second thought," Chapman said. "It was only a few hundred dollars."

I winced. Flip laughed.

Chapman said thoughtfully, "That *was* kind of a smug remark, wasn't it?"

"Not for a man with a new Jaguar," Flip answered. "It's not your fault that we live in a different world." He winked at me. "It's ours. We'd prefer your world." He sighed. "But that's how the mop flops."

For the first time, Whit Chapman didn't seem poised. I said genially, "Have another hot dog. You look pinched."

"Thank you," he said dryly. "I'll make my own, this time. I wouldn't want you boys to feel like servants."

He went to the other end of the table. Flip said quietly, "He's a cool one, right? I'll bet he can handle that Jag, too."

The rest of the boys were coming to the table now; I went over to the doorway, where Juan was in earnest conversation with Terry.

Juan looked up as I approached, as though seek-

ing an ally. Terry said, "Juan thinks we've deserted him."

I smiled. "We treat you better than your own brother, Juan."

"Everybody does that," he grumbled. "All right, I'm licked. I'm not so dumb that I can't see the way the wind was blowing tonight. Most of the members want this, don't they?"

"I don't know. I know a way to find out. We could turn it down and let it go to a membership vote to see if they can muster two-thirds."

"No," he said quietly. "That just leads to more friction, and we've already had too much. What do you say we vote for it right now, and inform our new friends before they go home?"

"What's the hurry?" I asked. "We still run this club."

"But we run it *for the members*," he said. "And I've talked to enough of them to know they want this. I vote 'yes.'"

I looked at Terry; he nodded.

I asked him, "Do you want to make the announcement?"

He nodded again, and went over toward the refreshment table where most of the boys were now congregated.

Juan looked at me sadly. "And now what do we have?"

"We still have a roadster club. Don't forget we were running coupes and sedans, too. Now we also run sports cars."

"Not *we*," Juan said. "*They!*"

I looked over toward where Whit Chapman was still talking with Flip. At the same moment he looked my way, and his smile was as cool and confident as ever.

I said, "We and they. I saw a used Porsche over on Petersen's lot. I'll bet Lin could make a winner out of that for me."

Juan looked startled. "A Porsche—? You, in a Porsche? What are you trying to prove?"

I took a deep breath. "I'm not sure, but I think I'm trying to prove I'm not Four-forty Trenton."

chapter four

It's HARD to say what sent me over to Petersen's used-car lot. Two days before, I had been about ready to vote with Juan on sports cars. And even the night of the meeting I had only been half-serious when I'd mentioned the Porsche to him.

Maybe I was remembering the sleek look of those little speedsters in Sunday's drag. Or could it have been the cool assurance of Whit Chapman? Or the lack of competition among local drag drivers?

Whatever it was, I said to Lin Wednesday night, "I'm going over to see Tom Petersen. Want to go along?"

"I do." He looked at me doubtfully. "The Porsche—?"

"Maybe."

He grinned. "You're joking. Not *you*, not Four-forty Trenton!"

"So I'll go alone. I don't need your sharp tongue."

"Don't be sensitive, champ. You can't trade the rod; Mr. Petersen has no use for that."

"Joe Adams will buy it," I said. "He's been after me for six months."

Lin's voice grew serious. "What is it, Ward? What's bothering you? This is quite a switch from Sunday."

"I don't know," I told him. "I really don't know."

"You're competitive," he guessed, "and you're running out of local competition. We can travel farther and find you all the competition you want."

"I'm competitive," I admitted. "I'd like to show some of the new boys you can't buy *everything*."

He shook his head. "Man, you're unpredictable." A pause. "Do you mean new boys like Whitney Sutherland Chapman, Jr.?"

"That would be one," I agreed.

"Well, relax then. Because you won't be running against his Jag, not in a Porsche. That's a different classification."

I said patiently, "Do you want to argue or go over to Petersen's with me? Let's go."

"I'm coming." He stood up. "But what will it prove? You'll be *buying* a car, too."

"But we'll improve it," I said. "That's the difference."

"I'll improve it," he corrected me, "and *you'll* drive it." He sighed. "I'll do the work, and you'll get the glory."

"So we'll switch," I said.

"No." He sighed again. "I guess I'm almost as

bad a driver as you are a mechanic. Let's go. What are we waiting for?"

I had been waiting for him to stop arguing—but we'd had too many words already, so I didn't voice this. The questions he'd asked weren't likely to be answered. I'd asked them of myself for two days and had found no answers.

Tom Petersen sold sports cars and racing equipment for American stock cars. I had bought a lot of equipment from him, but never a car. He was in the showroom when we arrived at his place; he came with us to the used-car lot.

There, he lifted the rear lid of the Porsche two-seater. The engine, as you know, is in the rear of the Porsche and it was quite a shock to me.

After working on a big Chev V8 of almost four hundred cubic inches, that little four-cylinder power unit of the Porsche seemed pitifully small.

"What's the displacement?" Lin asked.

"Almost fifteen hundred," Mr. Petersen said. "I think it's fourteen hundred and eighty-five."

In cubic centimeters, again. That would be less than a hundred cubic inches, one-fourth the size of my big Chev.

"Sweet little power plant," Lin said.

"It's never been raced," Mr. Petersen added.

"Hmmm," I said.

It was red, it was sleek, it was low and functional.

"Hmmm," I said, again.

"Hmmm, yourself," Mr. Petersen said. "You

know you want it; when do we start dickering?"

I went to the other side and climbed in behind the wheel. Good feel, good vision, handy controls. It was a clean car.

"Who owned it?" I asked.

"A man from Ventura. Why don't you drive it around the block?"

"It might make me want it," I answered, "and then if the price is too high—"

"You see the price, twenty-eight hundred," he said. "And no rods in trade."

"I don't mean the *asking* price," I said. "I mean the *selling* price."

"Ward," he said patiently, "I gave you boys special prices on your racing equipment because I was in favor of the work you were doing on that strip. But for personal transportation, I can't discount any merchandise that far. My bottom on that car, without a trade, would be twenty-six hundred dollars."

"It's not personal transportation only," I explained. "We're going to start running sports-car road races at the airport."

Interest in his voice. "Really? When was that decided?"

"Monday night. I was thinking—say we called this car the Petersen Special? And then every time I breezed to another victory, of course, your name—"

"Stop breezing," he said. "Those boys would

cream you. That's not a drag, Ward. A road race is *real* racing."

I said nothing. Lin said nothing. For about ten seconds, Mr. Petersen said nothing, and then he said, "Of course, I do get a lot of business from the sports-car bugs around town. And if they're joining the club and you're the president—"

"No," I said. "No, I don't want to use the SVRC for bargaining purposes." I climbed from the car. "It's a sweet, clean car, all right. Well, thanks for your courtesy, Mr. Petersen."

He frowned. "What's your hurry? I have an MG over here only three years old, and—"

"Thank you," I said, "but I'm looking for a Porsche."

Lin said, "Maybe Reilly Sales, in Ventura—?"

"We can run down there and find out," I agreed.

"Save the amateur theatricals for amateurs," Mr. Petersen said. "Joe Reilly is higher than I am. The Petersen Special, eh—? I suppose I'd get a discount on my ads in the programs?"

"Not a nickel," I said. "It's possible we'll have a waiting list."

Another silence. I waited, along with Lin.

Mr. Petersen said, "That's the way it would be listed in the programs, as the Petersen Special?"

I nodded.

"Then, if I put in an ad, there would be a tie-up in the public's mind."

"I suppose."

He laughed. "And when you came in last, the public would think that Petersen sells losers; we'd better stay away from him."

Lin said, "No. They'd think that Mr. Petersen is certainly a sport, backing a loser like Ward Trenton. That's the firm for me, they'll think, where the sports are."

"Good night to you both," I said. "You can walk home, Lin."

Lin chuckled. "Be a sport, Ward, like Mr. Petersen. Don't be sensitive."

"Twenty-two hundred dollars," Mr. Petersen said, "and I keep you in tires. You don't realize, novice that you are, how much it costs to keep a road-racing car in tires."

"I'll drive it around the block," I told him, "and bring my answer back with me."

The first block sold me. The engine that had seemed so small wasn't too small for the weight it was carrying. The steering was responsive, the traction unbelievable, a lively and spirited little sweetheart.

When I came back to the lot, Mr. Petersen asked, "Terms or cash?"

"Cash," I said, "as soon as I sell my rod. I could give you a few dollars to hold it."

"I'll hold it on your word," he said. "The Petersen Special, now, remember?"

"A deal," I said, and looked at Lin. "We may have to sell the Plymouth, too."

"Why?" Lin asked. "Mr. Petersen will take it in trade."

"I'll put it on the lot," Mr. Petersen countered, "and allow you every dollar it brings. And you may use that car while we try to sell the Plymouth."

So that was the deal, and fair enough. Lin and I took the little bug for a spin on the freeway before going home to show it to Mom and Dad.

Mom didn't think it was a very practical car; Dad loved it. "It puts the fun back into driving," he said, "but won't you miss the hot rod, the competition, the drags?"

Lin said, "We'll be in competition, Dad, but not in drags. We're entering the sports-car races on the Fourth."

"Ouch!" my mother said.

"That's a new game for you, Ward," my father said.

I nodded.

"You should have talked it over with us, first."

"I—realize that now, Dad. I guess we just didn't think—"

"It's all right," he said quietly. "Only remember one thing, Ward—it's new and you can't hope to do too well."

"I don't expect to win," I said, "not for a while. I've been lucky at the drags."

"You learned to win," he said. "You may have to eat crow for a while in this new sport."

Lin said, "He'll learn to eat it, but he'll never

learn to like it. This is going to be good for his humility, Dad."

My dad didn't smile. "Be careful. Both you boys are sensible, but we all do foolish things in the heat of competition. Be careful."

I promised him I would and made the promise to myself at the same time. Lin didn't have to tell me my competitive urge was strong. I knew it, but had never considered it a vice.

I could understand my father's warning, though. Driving against one competitor on a straight run wasn't nearly as dangerous as driving against a number of competitors on the tricky layout of a sports-car road race.

We still had a week of school before summer vacation, so we needed the Porsche for transportation. It was an impatient week for Lin, who was itching to get into that engine. He didn't intend to put us into the *modified* class; that would be too expensive. But certain refinements and tuning would improve our power plant without sacrificing our *production* status. And it all had to be done before July Fourth.

As soon as he began to work, it was my turn to be restless. For with the engine out, obviously I couldn't learn all I would need to learn about the car and the course.

Through it all, I didn't miss the Chev. Joe Adams bought it, and Tom Petersen sold the Plymouth the second day it was on the lot. There was no re-

gret in my mind about leaving the drag-strip world. Not during those first few weeks.

Terry McGovern had bought a twin-cam MGA, so Terry was going to be a competitor. Bud Ellinger came home from Princeton with his Sunbeam, all excited about the change in the club. It was a Sunbeam Alpine; it was likely that Bud would be racing against both Terry and me.

The posters were up around town; the promotion had gone out, and entries were coming in from all over the southern end of the state.

A week before the race, when we took our Lin-tuned bombshell to the new track, I suddenly realized that I hadn't seen Juan Arragon since the night of the meeting.

Pete was out there with Flip Donovan, working on Bill Burnett's car, and I went over to ask Pete about his brother.

"He's sulking," Pete said. "He'll get over it. You know Juan; he's a stubborn man."

"He's kept this club going," I said. "We need him, Pete. You tell him I said that."

Pete grinned. "Yes, leader. Yes, *boss*."

Laughing boy. . . . I went back to our car.

"What are you scowling about?" Lin asked.

"About Pete. He's probably the only member of this club who doesn't realize how important Juan is to all of us—and our continued sanity."

Lin said, "Maybe Juan figures we left the sanity behind when we let in the playboys."

"Those are the boys who need him the most,"

I said. "If he doesn't show up today, I'm going over to see him tonight."

Lin put a hand on my shoulder. "Slow down, serious brother. You are about to try a new and dangerous game. Keep your mind on that."

He was right. I slid into the seat and adjusted my goggles and my helmet. The hay bales had been brought in for the corners; the new surfacing to complete the course had been installed. The changes weren't many, but it seemed like an entirely different place. Perhaps because of all the expensive cars in the pit area. Was that a part of what was bothering Juan?

"Easy does it," Lin said. "On that hangar hairpin, you might have to go down to first. Don't try to prove anything."

"Prove—?" I asked. "Prove what?"

"That you're the great Ward Trenton." He grinned. "You aren't, not any more. You're a rookie, boy."

I made no answer. Like Pete, Lin wouldn't feel natural if he couldn't needle his big brother at least once a day.

I knew I was a rookie and had more to learn than I could possibly learn before July Fourth. I had no hopes of winning on that day, but I did have a firm determination to escape being humiliated.

There were both left and right turns on this course, nine in all. There was one straightaway where I could use fourth gear, a stretch of three-quarters of a mile that ended in a sweeping right

turn, and then the hangar hairpin, a sharp left that *might* be traversed in second. Today, I would use first gear, to get the feel of it.

The car was designed, and Lin had tuned it, to deliver its potential at the higher engine revolutions. This was a change from the driving I had learned on the highway, the only other kind of driving I had ever done that required turning. There was a trick I had to learn, of using the brake and accelerator with one foot to keep the engine revving while the brakes were on. There was a whole new world of traction and gravity, of downshifting and braking and intricate steering, a world in which I was only a baby.

This first trip wasn't a test; it was a cruise, an easy run of the two and a quarter miles. Even on the long straightaway, I rolled in third gear, looking for bumps. A Lotus went by me here, doing well over a hundred but completely under control. I saw it go into the sweeping right turn, and it was in that turn when the driver began to shift down for the hairpin.

It was something to watch, this driver's mastery through both turns and the downshift, and then his jack-rabbit acceleration out of the last turn, through the gears and winging.

When I came in, two laps later, Lin asked me, "Did you see that Lotus that went by; did you recognize him?"

"I saw the Lotus. I didn't get a good look at the driver. Who was it?"

"Whit Chapman," he said. "Man, he's smooth, isn't he?"

"I'd say that was a fair estimate. Did he sell the new Jaguar?"

"Never," Lin said. "That's where he really shines, in those big jobs. This Lotus belongs to his cousin, and Whit promised him he'd drive it for him on the Fourth."

"Oh," I said.

Lin laughed and shook his head. "Brother, we're in the wrong league. Do you realize we'll probably be running against that bomb?"

I shrugged.

Lin stared into space. "I wonder, I just wonder—"

"You wonder what?" I asked irritably.

"How many times he'll lap you."

chapter five

I WENT over to see Juan that night, right after dinner, before he had time to go out. If I had phoned first, I was sure he would have made some excuse for not seeing me.

Juan, when he's stubborn, is a highly unreasonable man.

Though I was early, Juan had already left. His mother told me he was over at the garage-clubhouse, working on his rod.

I found him there and asked him, "Where have you been, Juan. We've missed you, out at the strip."

He pointed at his car with a wrench. "Working. I have to get her ready by the Fourth."

I looked at him blankly. "The Fourth—? All sports cars on the Fourth, Juan."

"Not at Bakersfield," he said. "There's a drag up there."

"And at our strip," I said, "there'll be at least three thousand spectators, and we'll need every of-

ficer of the club we have to handle that crowd and all the entries."

"That's too bad," he said.

I took a deep breath and counted quietly to five. "Juan, we need you at the strip. Please, do this one thing for me."

"No," he said. "Later, maybe I'll come around again. But on the Fourth, I'm going to be in Bakersfield. That's *my* world, Ward."

I started to protest some more, but he interrupted. "I don't want to hear another word about it, *not one word.*"

We stared at each other for a few seconds, and then I turned and walked out. To me, Juan was acting too much like a bad loser. He had his reasons, undoubtedly, but at the moment I was as annoyed as he was stubborn.

Juan had always been active in handling the spectators and entrants at the drags. Temporarily, I had appointed Len Aberg chairman of the Competition Committee for this road race, and Len sorely needed Juan's help and experience. Our first president was letting us down. He was too old for this peevish petulance.

At home, Lin asked, "Bad news?"

I told him about my short and unhappy conversation with Juan.

"Maybe we could work through Pete," Lin suggested. "I'll try. Okay?"

"I appoint you a committee of one," I said. "Let's take the red bug out and see how she's perking."

The speed limit in our state is sixty-five miles an hour, so I didn't intend to get any racing experience on the highway. It was simply that this car was so much fun to drive. To me, the last few years, there were two kinds of driving: competitive driving, on the strip, was one; and the other was utility driving, for transportation. This little car was so responsive and spirited it made transportation driving a joy.

We drove up the winding mountain road to Solvang, watching the tachometer, testing the torque through the gears, enjoying driving as we hadn't since we were sixteen. Lin drove on the trip home, and I almost lost a mechanic.

He said, "Drags never really interested me. But this—now—" He paused. "Maybe, if you can't make the switch—I might—"

"Lin," I explained quickly, "then *I'd* be the mechanic."

"Ah, yes," he said sadly.

"I'll let you drive it for fun, once in a while, though," I mollified him.

"Thank you," he said acidly. "Considering it's half mine, that's unusually generous of you. I hope you'll look better than you looked this afternoon. Compared to that Whit Chapman, now—"

"I'll do better," I promised. "Patience, brother, patience."

It was something I could tell myself. I needed patience. My logical mind told me I couldn't be as successful at this as I had been in the drags, but my emotions told me I was going to be more successful

than my friends thought. It would take a lot of practice.

Both Lin and I were working part-time at a filling station that summer, but I spent all my free time before the Fourth out at the airport. I learned as much as I could about that little bomb under all the simulated conditions of road racing. Shifting, down and up, with an eye on the tach for maximum torque, was the technique on which I concentrated.

I noticed the experienced drivers who were practicing out there came out of those first- and second-gear turns perfectly lined up and under full acceleration. It wasn't an easy trick to learn.

And neither was downshifting before the tight turns; I was using my brakes too much in this operation, and not taking full advantage of my compression.

In the pits, two days before the Fourth, Terry McGovern said, "We should have stayed with the rods." He was grinning, but I'm sure he was at least half-serious.

"Juan did," I said. "Did we make the wrong decision, Terry?"

"I don't know." He took a breath. "Nobody else is staying away, only Juan."

"He's a stubborn man," I said, "but there were times when we needed a stubborn man. Remember when Flip tried to change that rule about two traffic violations and almost swung it?"

"I remember. Juan fought it like a tiger. And the rule still stands."

"And it covers everybody applying for membership," I reminded him. "Has anybody checked out these applications we're getting?"

He stared at me doubtfully.

"I know the membership application includes a question about traffic violations, but I can remember a couple of applicants who lied about theirs."

"Juan always did the checking through Captain Barker and Sheriff Lidell," Terry said. "Do you think he didn't, this time?"

"If you didn't send them to him, he didn't."

Terry took another breath. "I've been busy. Bill Burnett's the membership chairman. Why don't you ask him?"

"I'd better," I agreed. "Because Bill's been kind of busy, too, out here."

And Bill's all for the sports cars, I thought, but was ashamed to voice.

Terry looked around at the gleaming cars in the pits and then back at me. He was grinning once more. "Trying to cut down the competition, Ward?"

It was only a joke, *I hoped*. I pretended it was. I said, "For *both* of us. We'll win, one way or another."

The SVRC had worked closely with both the city and county law-enforcement agencies, and in return we were able to check our membership applications against their records.

I went over to where Bill was working on his MG

to find out if this new flood of applications had been checked.

"Not yet," he told me. "I've been too busy out here. I'll take them over tomorrow morning, Ward."

"The race is the day after tomorrow," I reminded him.

"So—? It's an open meet. The competitors don't have to be members of the SVRC. About sixty per cent of them will be from out of the county."

I hadn't even realized the obvious. Even in our open drags, we couldn't impose our membership restrictions on the entries from other clubs or the independent rodders. I stood there, feeling foolish.

Bill said lightly, "Good try, Ward."

"Good try—?" I stared at him blankly.

"To cut down the competition," he said. "That's a joke, son."

"I don't have any competition for last place," I told him. "I have it cinched."

I went back to our pit. Bill had said the same thing to me that Terry had; *I must have quite a reputation as a front runner*, I thought.

Terry was still there, and I told him Bill was going to check the applications tomorrow morning. "It's an open meet on the Fourth, anyway," I explained, "so it won't disqualify anybody." I looked at him evenly. "Bill kidded me about cutting down the competition, too. I must have some rep in this club."

"Everyone likes to needle a winner, Ward," he told me quietly. "You shouldn't let it get too personal."

"I don't figure to win," I said. "Not in this kind of racing."

"Okay," he said. "We won't argue. I'm driving to win, and I have even less chance than you have." He was cleaning his goggles. "Well, I'm going out for another trial run. Watch me; see if I'm improving."

He went over to his pit to climb into his little twin-cam. I went over to the Coke machine where Pete and Lin were standing.

"My treat, chief," Pete said. He put a dime in the machine for me.

"Thank you," I said. "How's Juan's disposition?"

"He never changes," Pete said. "Stubborn as ever."

"I miss him," I said. "I have a feeling we're going to have more of a crowd than we can handle day after tomorrow."

"We all miss him," Pete said, "but don't tell him that. I don't want him to get the idea he's indispensable." He winked at Lin. "Nobody around here is indispensable."

Another joke? We had a lot of comedians around the strip this afternoon. Terry and Juan and I had been running the club for two years. We had the best competitive records, and it's possible that was why we were the club officers. Perhaps we had played it too heavy from time to time, but some

of the younger members needed the heavy touch. Though they were bound to resent it.

I watched Terry coming out of the last turn before the finish line, his MGA skittering, tires squealing. It was not the Terry who had won a cup at Oklahoma City.

Terry and I were no longer winners, and Juan wasn't even a competitor. There would be some new winners, the smooth boys from the defunct club, the playboys.

Whitney Sutherland Chapman, Jr. came into the turn Terry had just vacated, his bigger car decelerating smoothly through the gears, his rear deck sliding exactly enough to bring him past the apex of the turn in perfect alignment for the power drive toward the line.

"That Jag," Lin said in admiration, "that's an automobile!"

"In the right hands," Pete said. "We wouldn't look that good in it, Lin."

"We're not supposed to," Lin answered. "We're mechanics."

I looked at both of them, but they were watching the Jag. I said, "Thanks for the Coke, Pete," and went back to my little red bug.

Next to it, Bud Ellinger was tinkering with his new Sunbeam Alpine. "Hi, champ," he said. "It looks different around here these days, doesn't it?"

"It does today," I said. "We'll still be running drags."

"Sure," he said skeptically. "Sure we will. Why did our president sell his rod, then?"

"I can always buy or build another," I told him. "I've had a lot of rods."

He smiled, saying nothing. He put on his helmet and climbed into his car.

Even my little red car seemed to be smiling at me. I was now in this new kind of racing. As Bud had pointed out, I had sold my altered coupe and bought a Porsche. No wonder Juan thought his friends were deserting him.

I could see both Terry and Whit on the long straightaway now, and the Jaguar moved past that twin-cam of Terry's without strain, skimming along that flat stretch of asphalt as smoothly as a gull in flight, first-class equipment under an expert's hands.

In half an hour, I was due at the station. I climbed into the Porsche and idled over to pick up Lin.

We both worked the evening shift until ten o'clock that night, and then I came back to substitute on the morning shift at seven. A few minutes before eleven, Bill Burnett pulled up in front of the pumps in the family sedan.

"Will you be through soon?" he asked.

"At eleven," I said. "Need gas?"

He nodded and I went around to the rear of the car. He came back there. "Something—unpleasant has happened, Ward."

I stared at him. "What—?"

"Whit Chapman lied on his membership application."

"How?"

"He listed only one moving traffic violation in the past year."

"And when was that?"

"This January. He had another one on his record that he didn't list, from last August."

"It's possible," I said, "that he forgot when it happened and assumed it happened a couple months earlier. So, tell him he's not eligible for membership until August. That won't hurt his feelings, will it?"

"He lied, he *lied*," Bill said. "You're missing the point, Ward."

"Or forgot," I said, "or made a mistake. He's your friend, Bill; you can read him the riot act if you want, or find out if he made an honest mistake."

"That's not the routine we followed in the past," Bill persisted. "When a membership application is found to be fraudulent, the directors voted on whether to reject the application or give the applicant a hearing."

"Not since I've been president," I said.

"It hasn't happened since you've been president," he told me patiently. "But, believe me, it's right there in the bylaws."

For a few seconds, neither of us said anything. I couldn't understand his persistence.

Finally, I said, "I think you're trying to tell me

something important, Bill, but I'm not getting it."

"All right." He paused, apparently embarrassed. Then he said slowly, "I was the prime mover in this—this big change in the club. I'm not so sure now that I was right. If any of the new boys, *my friends*, aren't treated just as strictly as we were, I was wrong in starting the move to bring them in."

I stared at him for seconds, and finally said, "You picked yourself a narrow road to walk, didn't you? Is that all that's eating you, Bill—this one application of Chapman's?"

"He shook his head. "It's only part of what's bothering me. Where's Juan these days? He's our conscience; he's our *rock*."

"He's getting ready for a drag up at Bakersfield," I said mildly. "And he's probably sulking, too. You've fought Juan a few times—you know how unreasonable he can get."

"We need him."

"I know. He'll be back. And about Chapman, I think you ought to talk with him before making any decision about that application."

"I plan to," Bill said. "But I think you should be with me when I do."

"I—?"

"You. You're our president. And I want Whit to know this was a club decision, not personal. He has a lot of respect for you, Ward."

"All right," I said. "We'll see him at the airport this afternoon."

chapter six

I HAD learned two things from Bill's visit that surprised me. One was the fact that Whit Chapman admired me, and the second surprise was Bill's almost too strait-laced attitude about that application.

Bill Burnett, before he joined the San Valdesto Roadster Club, had been about as wild a rich young man as we had around this town. He had competed on the strip long before he had been eligible to join the club. His traffic record had been exactly that, a *record*; nobody in town had a worse one.

In his three years as a member of the SVRC, he hadn't even had a parking ticket.

And now that he was converted, I thought he might be playing it a little too heavy with his unconverted friends. So that afternoon, when we went over together to Chapman's pit, I was more in-

clined than Bill to take the light view of Whit's incomplete application.

Whit was standing near his cousin's Lotus, talking with Len Aberg. Len must have been aware of the reason for our visit; he went back to his own pit as we came closer.

Chapman smiled at us and said, "I've got a feeling this is a two-man committee. And I think I know why."

"It's about your application," Bill said.

Whit nodded. "I guessed that. When I filled out the form, I thought that first ticket had been handed to me in June. It was August, wasn't it?"

Bill nodded. "Did Len tell you that?"

Whit smiled. "Let's not involve Len. So I made a mistake. You might consider it a lie. What happens now?" He was looking at me.

I said, "I've been told the usual procedure is to have the board decide to give you a hearing or reject your application without a hearing." I paused. "It's never happened before while I've been on the board."

"What happens if I simply withdraw my application?" he asked coolly.

Bill said, "Then the board has nothing to decide. Is that what you want, Whit?"

He looked from Bill to me. "Why not? You know, I don't really think I need the San Valdesto Roadster Club."

"Easy, now," I said. "Don't take a personal view of this, Whit. A club without rules is no club at all."

"Personal—?" he asked. "Isn't your visit personal? Don't you honestly think I lied on that application?"

He was looking straight at me, and I was too flabbergasted to answer.

Bill came through. Bill said evenly, "No, he doesn't, Whit. As a matter of fact, I'm the boy who's been pushing this thing. Ward came with me only because I asked him to."

A silence, while Whit Chapman stared at both of us in turn. And then he said acidly, "I'll bet. I'll just bet!"

I said, "Withdraw your application. If you grow up and want to apologize, I'll be glad to hear it." I turned and headed back for my pit.

I was steaming. I think I was as angry with Bill as I was with Chapman. Bill had started the move to bring his friends in, and now he was the man who was making a big deal out of Chapman's probably innocent oversight. Perhaps Juan had been right, though his stubbornness had been based more on instinct than on reason.

I was climbing into the Porsche when Bill came back from Chapman's pit.

"You look ready to boil over," he said.

"I am. No words now, Bill. We've had too many. I'm busy now." I started the engine and put on my helmet.

"Ward," he said, "you're being—"

I didn't hear what I was being; the car was in first and moving onto the track.

The little red Petersen Special moved through the gears eagerly up to third, and then I barreled her and we shot into the first right turn at a pace too fast for her traction. We went squealing around the unbanked corner like the rawest novice, a sad display of hot and heavy handling.

I eased my foot on the accelerator and swung wide to take the following turn in as straight and sane a line as possible. This was no place to work off a peeve. I cooled off and slowed down.

I was on my second circuit, moving well down the long stretch, when Whit Chapman went past me in his cousin's Lotus. He was really logging. The tires of the Lotus squealed faintly even on the sweeping right turn that preceded the hairpin left.

To me, it seemed certain he was headed for a crack-up as he swept out of the right, shifting down for the sharp left. He wasn't out of control for a second, his slide out of the hairpin was smoothly handled, bringing him into position for the grandstand surge.

He had it, that boy—he was our new leader.

I took one more circuit of the course before pulling into the pits. Bill Burnett was still there, talking with Lin.

I said to Lin, "You'd better take a trial spin. I'm not sure I'm designed for this business."

Lin smiled. "Okay, grumpy." He glanced out at the disappearing Lotus. "Maybe we'll have some novice events, Ward, and you won't run into those old hands."

I climbed from the car, ignoring Bill. I went over to the water jug.

When I had finished making a three-act play out of drinking a paper cup full of water, Bill was gone, and Lin was idling out onto the course. I climbed up on the ladder we had brought to bring more of the course into view.

To my untrained eye, Lin looked every bit as competent as yours truly on this tricky layout. And three laps later, when he came in, I told him that.

"I'm not the driver you are, Ward," he said, "and we both know it. It's one of your sour days and I know why."

"Oh? Did Bill come crying to you?"

Lin said calmly. "He wasn't crying. His conscience was bothering him more than it should, but I admire that. You know, Ward, Juan used to take a lot of detail off your hands. You didn't have to make any of these decisions, with Juan around."

I said nothing. He was right; Juan's absence was a part of the reason for my mood. And perhaps my own conscience was troubled. I could have voted with Juan and had no problems.

"We're going to lose some races," Lin said smilingly. "We have some lickings due us. Let's settle down with that thought."

"I expect to lose," I assured him. "I'm trying to avoid being humiliated."

His voice was quiet. "Okay, brother. Now you'd better look up Bill Burnett and apologize, and then we'll go home for dinner."

He was right. I went over to Bill's pit and apologized, and we went home. The whole mess had probably been a tempest in a teapot, and perhaps I had let it bother me too much. But with all these new members coming in, the character of the club could change. And I was partly responsible for all these new members.

Len Aberg had called a meeting of the Competition Committee, and he phoned after dinner to ask if I would sit in on it. I told him I'd be there.

Len had picked an eight-man committee; and only three of them were members I knew: Terry McGovern, Bud Ellinger and Bill Burnett. Those three had been friends for years; they hadn't met at the club. And the other five all came from their neighborhood.

Well, I was the middle-class member present; if there were to be any complaints registered as to the committee's make-up, it would look a little too personal coming from me.

I noticed Bill Burnett frowning as he looked around the room, and then he whispered something to Terry McGovern and Terry nodded. In less than a minute, Terry came over to sit next to me.

"Mostly new boys," he commented.

"I noticed that," I said. "For a second there, I thought it was the greens committee of the San Valdesto Country Club."

He took a deep breath.

"A joke," I said. "Len simply picked his friends. I doubt if he had any ulterior motive in mind."

"He's been a member long enough to know better," Terry said. "Ward, you and I are going to have to fill in the void Juan left behind."

"I'm afraid so. And I think Bill Burnett will help with that. He already has tried, but I was too dumb to realize what he was trying to save. We—uh—had a little fuss, but I apologized to him this afternoon."

"I heard about it." He looked up as Len Aberg came over. "Not very many of the old hands here, Len."

Len nodded agreement. "Most of the old hands are rodders, Terry."

"It doesn't matter. They can help with the crowd and on anything connected with engines. I think you'd better contact Donovan and Pete Arragon for tomorrow."

A pause, while Len studied his friend. Then he said, "Okay." He glanced at me.

"Innocent," I said. "Terry gets his own ideas. I think he's right, though."

"Okay," Len said again, and went up front to call the meeting to order.

I was beginning to get the picture. I had been so involved in my personal lacks as a road racer, I hadn't realized the significance of Juan's withdrawal and Bill Burnett's concern. These new members were kids who had had their own way more often than not. It was our job to see that they adjusted to the traditions and rules of the club.

Len is a fine organizer, and before the meeting

was over he had his stewards picked and their duties defined.

Tomorrow was race day, and I had been edgy all week. But I slept well that night. There would be a novice event, tomorrow, restricted to club members who had never raced sports cars in competition. I wouldn't be meeting Whit Chapman in *that* one, at least.

Lin had to work a few hours in the morning; he would get a ride out after work with Joe Adams. I had to leave early for the technical inspection at seven o'clock.

Though we had not as yet tied up with either the Sports Car Club of America or the California Sports Car Club, we were roughly following the production-car specifications of the SCCA. Pete Arragon and Flip Donovan had been added to the early-morning crew who were checking specifications.

Len had hit the club treasury for enough money to outfit all the boys in white jumpers, and he had a smart-looking crew already at work. I was one of the first in line; the Petersen Special was checked and approved before eight o'clock.

My headlights were covered, hub caps removed, and roll bar measured. I was ready to go. And, out under that clear morning sun, the track was deserted. It would be a crime to waste it.

It was probably wishful thinking, but I felt that my first circuit of the course was the smoothest and fastest I had ever managed. And I knew my sec-

ond lap was better than the first. The loser's attitude I had carefully developed over the past month was beginning to dissipate in that warm morning sun.

When I came back to the pits, Terry McGovern was standing there with Len. Terry said, "You looked better this morning than you've looked all week. What happened?"

I shrugged. "Maybe all the practice is starting to pay off. Let's see how you look. You're going to be in that novice race, aren't you?"

"Among others," he admitted. He was putting on his helmet. "We're starting over, Ward. It's still fun." He climbed into the twin-cam and pulled out.

Len Aberg was still standing there. "All the cups you two boys have won for this club—" He grinned. "Be a good loser, like Terry."

I smiled and said nothing, watching an old competitor try a morning run. Terry and I had fought out some close ones on the drag strip, but we'd been fighting for *first* place in those. Would the competition be any less exciting at the tail end of the parade? I climbed up onto the ladder as Terry swept out of view around the grandstand turn.

It might sound immodest, but I had a feeling I could take him. He had improved since the last time I watched him, but I was sure he hadn't improved enough to beat our red bug with the tuning Lin had given it.

Three laps later, when he came in, I told him,

"You're better, I think. Now, if you only had a Porsche—"

"Huh!" he said. "You and I, boy, will fight it out for last place. And last place is an honor I'm reserving for you."

A few fans had already driven into the infield, the boys who had platforms to erect, or smaller platforms already built on the beds of pickup trucks. These were the real aficionados, the boys who wanted to see every inch of every race.

This, I had to admit, was a much more popular spectator sport than drags and was bound to enrich both Mr. Calvano and the club treasury.

Mr. Calvano was now at the track, supervising the stocking of his grandstand refreshment stand. Terry and I went over to say hello.

He is a short and amiable man of about two hundred and fifty pounds, and he said warmly, "Free Cokes for both of you. There'll be a crowd today."

Terry said, "That's why we let the playboys in, Mr. Calvano, only so you could make more money. Both Ward and I are willing to suffer humiliation if you profit."

Mr. Calvano set a pair of Cokes on the counter for us and said dryly, "The old McGovern blarney. And how's your father, Terry?"

"Fine, sir." He lifted his drink. "Here's to a successful and profitable day."

Mr. Calvano nodded, almost absently, and his

voice was more serious. "Boys, did you make the right decision for the *club*?"

Terry said, "I guess. Why?"

"Some of those boys," Mr. Calvano said quietly, "are not quite as—well, as sensible as most of the rodders I've met. You see, I've lived in this town all my life, and one reason you boys are getting this strip from me is due to my high regard for the San Valdesto Roadster Club." He looked at me. "Has Terry ever told you how we fought to get this property when the club was first organized?"

I nodded.

Mr. Calvano said, "Half the boys in this club come from the neighborhood where I grew up. It's not a rich neighborhood. The club Terry and Juan founded has been a fine influence on a number of boys in that neighborhood who could have gone wrong. I've *never* forgotten that." He paused. "And now I understand Juan is no longer a member."

"That's not true, sir," I said. "But Juan is stubborn, and there's a drag at Bakersfield today."

"Oh—?"

"And as for the new boys," Terry said, "they had better adjust to the club. Because I guarantee you, Mr. Calvano, the club is not going to adjust to them."

"What if they get enough members to take it over?" he asked.

Terry smiled, "Why, Mr. Calvano, you then play

your ace. It's still a year-to-year lease, you know, that the club signs with you."

Mr. Calvano's smile matched Terry's. "I'd forgotten that. Imagine me forgetting an ace in the hole! Terry McGovern, you're still your father's son."

Terry said, "I try to remember all the things he's told me, sir. And let's not judge the new boys too quickly. I know quite a few of them well, and they're solid citizens, if a little spoiled. Remember what a spoiled brat you used to think I was."

"Never," Mr. Calvano said, "not for a minute! Your memory's bad, Terry."

Terry grinned and drank his Coke and winked at me.

From the direction of the grandstand turn, there was the thunder of that sweet Jag engine, and Whit Chapman's silver speedster came hurtling around the long turn and went streaking down the north straightaway.

Mr. Calvano shook his head. "Whitney Sutherland Chapman, Jr.?"

Terry nodded.

Mr. Calvano was still shaking his head. "A wild one. Even in my neighborhood, we've read about him."

"He's not eligible to be a member yet," I said, "because of his traffic record. That's been explained to him and he withdrew his membership application."

"Oh—?" Mr. Calvano frowned. "But he'll be driving here today, won't he?"

Terry and I nodded.

"But not subject to club discipline?"

"Only here, on the course," Terry said. "We have stewards, and careless drivers will be flagged off the track."

"Okay," Mr. Calvano said doubtfully. "Well, Terry, thanks for reminding me about my ace."

chapter seven

THE TRIAL and qualifying runs had been completed, and I stood with Joe Adams and Lin, watching the Formula cars lining up on the grid for the first race of the day. The first row was three cars wide, the second row two cars wide, the third three cars wide again. That was the pattern of the starting grid, quite different from speedway or drag racing.

There was nobody I knew in the starting field; all but two cars were from outside the county. All the engines were running and the smell of castor-blended oil was heavy on the warm air. One thing was certain, they were better *looking* cars than any of the rods that had ever competed here. The lines were smooth and functional, the colors bright, the sound of their turning engines mellow and steady. It was no sport for slobs.

In the starter's hand, the green flag was furled

as the tailenders lined up. And now they were all ready and waiting.

The green flag was unfurled and lifted; the motor rumble grew. The flag flashed down and the rumble was a roar, the smell of oil grew intense, and eight super speedsters went barreling into the grandstand turn, fighting for position.

There were at least four highly competent road racers in that first event, and the way they stole that first corner from the others in the field was a primary education in the art.

Into the north straightaway, these four were in the lead and settling down according to the pace and the strategy each had planned. The two who had the fastest machines took off immediately to try to build up a gap that couldn't be eliminated by the superior cornering ability of the two cars behind. They went snarling along that north stretch nose to nose, neither machine seeming to have an inch of advantage.

It was a ten-lap race; the cars behind gave the leaders enough clearance to permit them their own maneuver ground. It was not one race but four, halfway through the first lap; each of the drivers was now in a personal duel.

I could see now what Whit Chapman had meant by a drag being won by the car, a road race by the driver. The cars were close; but the two fastest did not enjoy enough of a speed advantage to overcome superior cornering by their competitors. It was a ding-dong battle all the way, won on

the last hairpin turn by Ken Stiles from Monterey in a sweet little Dolphin.

And then it was time for the first novice race.

Joe Adams said smilingly, "It's bound to be a let-down after that opener, but good luck, rookie." He climbed up on the ladder I had just deserted.

The logical order of cars on the grid is to put the fastest cars and most competent drivers in the front row to avoid as much traffic confusion as possible. But we were all novices here, and our cars were untested in competition.

Yours truly, because of his four-forty reputation and the superior tuning by his near-genius brother, was on the right end of the first row. That gave me the advantage, an advantage I didn't want.

The first of the course's nine turns was to the right; it would be logical to expect, if we were all equals, that I, Four-forty Trenton, would lead the pack through that first turn.

Somehow, I didn't think I would make it. Bud Ellinger's Sunbeam was in that field, and Bud had been driving that car a lot better in his trials out here than I had been handling the Porsche. Terry McGovern's twin-cam flanked me, and Terry had a few horses I lacked. Behind us, in the second row, there were a pair of Fiat Spiders, owned by two brothers from Ventura, good boys in hot cars and anxious, as always, to show up any competitor from San Valdesto.

I tried to get my morning confidence back and

concentrate on my own strategy. I had the edge and they were no more experienced than I was. I kept telling myself this and not quite believing it mattered.

They were all lined up now and the flag was raised. I didn't dwell on my chances any more; the moment was at hand.

At the drop of the flag, the three of us in the front row matched noses inch for inch to the shift. Here, my drag training helped, and I went into second at exactly the point that would boost my acceleration.

I came into that first turn at a speed I had never attempted before, and the hay bale loomed and there were butterflies in my stomach. To my left, Terry's MG was snarling; on my right and behind, Bud Ellinger was trying to cut the inside of the corner.

I'll be modest—it was mostly luck. I had the line, and that forced Bud to decelerate; Terry's deck started to swing and he lost ground in his slide. I led them all out of the first turn and into the north stretch.

The north stretch wasn't very long; I went up to the top in third and stayed in third through the long left turn that followed. Down to second then for the S-turn, and into the longest stretch.

And here I made my first mistake in strategy. The straightaway ahead seemed to stretch almost to the horizon, and my instincts had been developed

on the drag strip in cars designed completely for quick acceleration over a shorter run. I went into fourth gear.

Terry shot past me first, zooming, as I pressed the accelerator to the floor. The response was less than I needed; I went back to third as one of the brothers from Ventura went by.

They had taken third gear right up to its peak. From where I now rode, in a threatened third place, I couldn't tell if they ever went into fourth before that sweeping right turn.

The threat to my third-place position was coming from the right, a former Solvang Scrambler in a new Triumph. He stayed on my right through the long turn and led me into the hangar hairpin.

He had the line as we went down through the gears to first and therefore I had farther to go. We came squealing out of the sharp turn with our sides only inches apart, but the nose of the Triumph was well in front. He had the edge but I had the torque; I moved past him before we shifted up to second, the red bug soaring.

Ahead, Terry and the Ventura boy were well in front, but it didn't make my personal duel any less exciting. The bug and I had a four-length lead over the Triumph from Solvang as we skimmed along the short stretch before the grandstand turn.

I had what I thought was an established line through that turn, a controlled slide in second, swinging wide into the grandstand lane. Unfor-

tunately, my sense of traction had been developed on the big slicks of drag racing, with tires that afforded a maximum of traction.

Slicks are illegal in sports-car racing, and the Porsche's tires were much smaller than the rear tires on my coupe. I went into a controlled slide that teetered for a heart-stopping second on the brink of turning into an *uncontrolled* slide.

In that moment of lost poise, the sharp kid in the Triumph saw his opening and he moved in like a champ, cutting to the inside of my almost completely motionless car. It had been quick thinking and perfect handling. He had two car lengths on me as we came charging past the pits for the first time.

From first to fourth in one lap, was that going to be the pattern of my maiden road race? I gave the Triumph running room and waited for my chance.

For two laps, the gap stayed constant while the fifth-place car began to pick up ground behind me. I had decided by this time that I would never catch the Solvang boy on a turn; my best hope would be the long south straightaway.

I cut down the length of his lead a little and almost crowded him into the S-curve that led into this stretch. And, coming out under full gun, I stayed in third gear this time.

I had the torque to take him and I did, halfway through the long stretch. I stayed in third through the sweeping right turn that ended in the hangar

hairpin. Here, I double-shifted down to first but was back in second and zooming before he came into the corner.

I was back in third place and I meant to stay there or improve. Neither of the cars in front of me was in sight as I came into the grandstand lane; my chances of improving were slim. And then, on the seventh lap, as I came out of the hangar turn once more, I saw Terry's twin-cam beyond the hay bale, at rest with a bent rear wheel. The red bug was riding in second place.

The Solvang Triumph had not challenged for two laps, and there were only three to go. At the far end of the grandstand stretch, the Ventura Fiat was just going into the turn, and he seemed to be loafing. I upped the pace of the Petersen Special, hoping to catch him napping. As we arrowed past the pits, Lin held both fists high in acclamation.

In the north stretch, the Fiat seemed to be closer as I maintained my best speed of the race. He must have spotted me in his rear-view mirror soon after that; at my next view of him, the gap was longer and the distant whine of his engine was audible above the Porsche's song.

Second place and no challenger in sight? I decided my pace was fast enough for my present skill, and if I could finish in this position I would be a very lucky man today.

I didn't loaf, and I kept a watchful eye for any challenger who might appear from behind. None did until I was almost to the end of the long

straightaway. It was the cream Alpine of Bud Ellinger, and he was too far behind to be a threat.

So there was the story of my first road race, a clean second among the novices, and I came into the pits after my extra lap feeling better than I had since the night of the meeting.

Lin handed me a big bottle of root beer and said, "I withdraw all the nasty remarks I've made this month. A winner is a winner, on any course."

"I didn't win," I pointed out. "And these were the beginners."

"You were the first to finish among the SVRC members," Joe Adams said. "You're still our leader, boy!"

"Our *freshman* leader," Lin said. "We'll see how you do with the upper classmen later."

I climbed out of the car and stretched the tension out of my shoulders. Two pits away, the boy who had beaten me and the Solvang driver were talking, and I went over there.

The Solvang driver was a redheaded lad I had often competed against on the strip. "Congratulations," he said. "I figured this was my only chance to avoid getting beaten by Ward Trenton. I thought you'd be at Bakersfield for sure. And you show up here in a Porsche."

"I sold my rod," I told him. "Juan's up at Bakersfield for the SVRC." I held out a hand to the Ventura driver. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," he said. "I beat Ward Trenton—I've already entered *that* in my diary."

"You clobbered me," I said. "Are both your clubs deserting the rods?"

The Solvang driver said, "We're about fifty-fifty right now. You see, we never had a strip up there, but we're dickering for some old fire trails for a *real* road race. If we can land them, we can keep the club solvent."

The Ventura boy said, "We're still mostly rod. My brother and I got bored with following you and Juan and Terry McGovern home, so we cracked open our piggy banks and bought a pair of Fiats."

The Solvang redhead said, "By piggy banks, he means oil wells. I think we're in a rich man's game, Ward."

The Ventura boy said, "So were golf and tennis at one time. But this sport is changing, just as they did. Some day, take a pencil and figure how much investment you had in your hot rod. And this sport draws crowds; that helps your club."

And Mr. Calvano, I thought. I was beginning to have a much more tolerant view of sports-car racing—having just finished second.

Back in our pit, Joe Adams and Lin were working on the bug. Out on the grid, the big-bore production jobs were lining up; the Jags and Corvettes and Aston Martins, the Mercedes and Ferraris. The silver XK-E of Whit Chapman was in the first row.

I climbed up on the ladder to watch this one.

The rumble of their engines was deeper; these were the engines that developed a horsepower for

each cubic inch, or better. These were the boys who drew the crowd we had today.

I could see why the crowd was here, after the first two laps of that ten-lap race. Compared with this show, our novice opener had been a sad display of wasted horsepower.

Whit Chapman led from the drop of the flag, that silver Jag under master control. On the turns there was no sign of his downshifting or upshifting; the flow of power was constant, and he burned just enough rear rubber to bring the nose of that XK-E into line for his acceleration surge.

"Man—!" Joe Adams said. He shook his head in wonder.

Lin said, "We're in the wrong league, brother. We should have gone to Bakersfield with Juan."

Down the long stretch the silver Jag was singing now, and it must have been doing close to a hundred and forty miles an hour. In the seat, that tall, skinny, cool and cocky young millionaire rode erect and confident, the ideal combination of man and machine.

"Our new leader," Joe Adams said, and winked at Lin.

I smiled. "I never realized how much you boys resented me until now. I'm tasting sour grapes."

Lin laughed and put a hand on my shoulder. "You'll learn, Ward. You may never be that good, but think how much better you can be without being *that* good!"

On the big right turn after the straightaway, a

Corvette from La Jolla was pressing Chapman now, riding his deck, playing it too close for safety, I thought.

Chapman's line through the curve had been wide and the Corvette swung inside that line, its driver probably planning on a power slide and the shorter route to bring him into the hangar hairpin with a lead.

The La Jolla boy swung the wheel sharply and went into first, revving his engine for the slide. It came too fast and lasted too long. The Corvette went careening toward the hay bales as Chapman touched his brake, swung his rear deck viciously to the right, and cut inside the Corvette to the line that would bring him out of the turn under full power.

Above the screaming engines, the murmur of audience appreciation drifted on the odorous air; it had been a spectacular recovery from a bad situation. Chapman had thirty feet on the Corvette before it was again under control.

Joe Adams said, "That La Jolla boy cut it too close, didn't he? Do we have any judges to rule on that kind of driving?"

"The stewards," I said. "Len Aberg's in charge of them."

"And Len is competing today," Joe said. "I think we need a safety committee, Ward. Mr. Calvano can refuse to sign the lease, you know, if he's not happy with what we're doing here."

He was right. At least eighty per cent of our

members were here today, over half of them as competitors. The SVRC was swinging to sports cars, and we would need some rules to guide us.

Out on the course, Whit Chapman was making a runaway of this race now, a San Valdesto boy leading the parade, maintaining our reputation for first-class competition. A San Valdesto boy, but not, for a change, an SVRC competitor.

He won by more than ten seconds over the La Jolla Corvette, and when he made the winner's circuit with the checkered flag in his car, he was applauded heartily all the way around.

I went over to congratulate him.

His face was bland, his handshake limp, his voice cool. "Thank you," he said.

"Don't sulk," I said. "So we had a misunderstanding. In a month you'll be eligible for the club, and we can certainly use a winner."

"The club has you," he said, "the great Ward Trenton. How many winners do you need?"

I took a deep breath and said nothing, waiting for my annoyance to subside. Then I said quietly, "Congratulations again. Try to grow up."

I left him and went to Len Aberg's pit. I said, "Len, in that last race, that boy from La Jolla—"

"Has already been warned," he finished for me. "What he did wasn't wild enough to disqualify him, but Bill Burnett has given him the word." He smiled. "Ward, don't you worry about the new boys. They'll play the game our way or they'll get out."

Good enough. With Bill and Len and Terry our watchdogs, the SVRC would not be lowering its safety standards. And I could concentrate more on my own problems, such as learning how to drive well enough to give Whitney Sutherland Chapman, Jr. some serious competition.

chapter eight

THE THIRD RACE was for Production B and C cars again, but a consolation event, so Chapman wasn't in it. Only two boys from our county were entered, and only one of them a club member. Neither of them made any showing in that field.

Glenn Allis from Pasadena, in a new Corvette, had the crowd murmuring through every lap. His driving was not as smooth as Chapman's had been, but his sense of tractionable pace was a little better, I thought. At any rate, he finished the ten laps at a speed three seconds under that of the XK-E. And more than a minute better than his own speed in the previous race. Somebody had done a fine tuning job in a few minutes.

And now for the E and F production cars once more, with experienced drivers, this time. The first three finishers from the novice run would be in this ten lap race: the Ventura boy in the Fiat,

Bud Ellinger in his cream Sunbeam Alpine, and yours truly.

And in the first row on the grid, Whit Chapman was already lining up in his cousin's Lotus, obviously the top combination in the field.

Lin said, "I've given you a little richer mixture in the upper ranges. You sounded starved on that long straightaway. You should have a few more revs at the top."

Joe said, "Take your time, Ward. Lay back for a few laps. There could be some spin-outs in this field."

I grinned at him. "I don't want to win that way, Joe. Somebody might get hurt."

"I didn't mean that," he protested. "I meant—" He paused.

What he had probably meant was that I wasn't ready to go up there and tangle with the leaders, not with my present skills, or lack of them.

I said, "I'll be careful. I'll be cool and smart. Don't you worry, Joe; I'm not expecting any miracles."

"You're expecting to win," he said. "It's the way you operate. And that would be a miracle."

"You're wrong," I told him. "I'm not here to win; I'm here to learn." I started the engine, heading for the grid.

And to avoid humiliation, I added to myself. If this gang was as competent as the boys who had competed in the big-bore runs, I wasn't likely to

finish in any position that would make me proud.

I was in a three-car row. Bud Ellinger flanked me on the right, a Mercedes 190 SL on the left. That is the four-cylinder Mercedes, but an overhead cam engine at least three hundred cubic centimeters larger than my Porsche engine.

Its driver called over, "Aren't you Ward Trenton?"

I nodded.

"New to this end of the business, aren't you?"

I nodded again and managed to smile with false confidence.

"I saw you win the cup at Oklahoma City," he told me, "at that National Drag."

There was no time to comment on that; all the cars were in line, their engines running, the stewards satisfied, the flag raised in the hand of the starter.

I had stolen the lead in that second race, but I had started in the first row and was against novices.

I was in the third row this time, and these boys weren't novices. At the drop of the flag, I was practically alone on the grid. The five cars ahead burned rubber into the turn; the Mercedes to my left seemed to have been shot from a gun.

I was *practically* alone, as I said. To my right, Bud Ellinger was under way at a more believable pace, only a little faster than my own. It was a right-hand turn and he had the line. He led me into it and led me out of it, his Sunbeam winding up.

Ward Trenton, highly admired winner of a cup at Oklahoma City, followed all of his superiors into the north stretch.

The red Porsche grumbled impatiently and I gave it more steam, watching the tail of the Alpine grow smaller, knowing I would have to move a lot faster than I had in the novice run if I wasn't to be lapped in this race.

The tires were new and the Porsche was perking. I had some alternate lines through the turns that I intended to try, and a theory of harder and later braking I had been considering. I spanned that stretch at a speed I had never attempted before and downshifted for the corner a second short of calamity.

As I powered out of it, I could see Bud's Sunbeam ahead; I had gained on him. I continued to gain without challenging all the way to the longest stretch.

Here, I threw away the anchor. I caught him halfway through that long stretch and came barreling down on the big right turn before the hangar hairpin with the Sunbeam crowding my deck. Again, I tried a new line through the curve, and it seemed better. I had a full-length lead into the hairpin.

Downshift, brake, rev, downshift, rev—and then soaring out with an increased lead; I was improving.

I was needing the tachometer less and less for shifting; I could tell from the sound of the engine

almost exactly what the needle showed. Through the S-curve I stayed in third and maintained the lead over Bud.

We seemed to be alone on the track. Not one of the cars ahead was visible until I came out of the last half of the double curve. From here, I could see the long straightaway between the hangars, over half a lap ahead of us.

It was there that I had my first glimpse of Whit Chapman since the start of the race. He was half a lap in front of me, and the race was less than three laps old.

I saw it and couldn't believe it. If he could gain half a lap in three, he should be able to gain a full lap in six. Which meant he would lap me before two-thirds of the race was run. And I had never driven better.

In my rear-view mirror, I could see the Sunbeam losing ground and then a puff of white smoke followed by a sharp backfire and a gust of black smoke. Bud was having ignition trouble.

On the grandstand stretch, I ran the red bug to her top in third and burned rubber all around the right corner that followed. When we came out into the short straightaway, there was no sign of the Alpine; Bud must have gone into the pits.

In my short glimpse of Whit Chapman, I'd also seen a hundred yards of track to his rear, and there had been no challenger in that hundred yards. It was likely that all of us were strung around the track, and it was possible that a few of the cars

ahead were also being creamed by that Lotus. I sent the Porsche up to my limit, though not hers, and went looking for somebody to beat.

It took me two laps to get within challenging distance of the car ahead, an Elva Fiberglass roadster driven by Ken Stiles' younger brother, Ted. Ted was *almost* a rookie; he had about five races behind him. But he was all Stiles, all competitor.

For a torrid, screaming lap we fought it out. Ted had all the optional equipment on that Elva that the code permitted, and both he and Ken were top mechanics. I never would have made it if he hadn't badly misjudged the second curve of the S. He grazed a hay bale, knocked over two cones, and temporarily left the marked course.

All four wheels had been outside the course, which meant that he had to re-enter the course at the same place he had left it. That forced him into a looping reverse turn in second gear and lost him at least ten seconds.

I thought I had been driving at my peak for the first three laps, but I knew I was making better time now. Perhaps Mr. Whit Chapman's timetable would be disrupted. Perhaps he wouldn't lap me on the sixth circuit.

He didn't. I was halfway through the eighth lap, less than two hundred feet behind the Ventura Fiat, when the sleek Lotus showed up in my mirror.

It was the great Chapman, and he was coming on like an express train. I milked a few more revs out of the red bug and narrowed the gap to the Fiat.

In my mirror, now, I could see that Chapman was hanging back. A seasoned campaigner, he was not going to move into a three-car duel. Ahead, the Fiat was slowing and swinging wide for the refreshment-stand corner.

Now, I thought, and the Porsche seemed to read my mind. I took the inside line, down shifted, revved, and swung in a sharp power turn. Even Chapman couldn't have handled it smoother. The Fiat was still sliding as I came charging out of the bend.

Confidence flowed through me, a confidence that was almost smug. Until, a hundred feet past the turn, a comet went by.

It couldn't be, I thought. Even the Fiat couldn't have regained all that ground this quickly, and the Lotus had been well behind us both. It couldn't be, but it was—Whit Chapman was rapidly moving out of sight ahead. He had lapped me, three-fourths of the way through my eighth circuit.

In my mirror I saw the Fiat, and not another car in sight. Which meant there had been no challenge to Chapman; he had been driving well beyond any pace he needed to win.

Had it been personal? I had a bad habit of considering too many things personal, but this—? Chapman was no rookie, and only a fool drove faster than he needed to drive for the victory. And if it had been personal, why?

There was no car in sight ahead but the Lotus, the Fiat was not gaining from behind. I maintained

my present pace, certain that the two laps left weren't enough to improve my position.

Past the pits, Lin held the sign aloft; I was riding fifth, a quarter of a lap behind the fourth-place car. In an eight-car race, I was riding in the second division, to use a baseball term. So all right, I was *leading* the second division. My present skill would not permit me to pick up a quarter of a lap in two laps; I would stay where I was, king of the also-rans.

And why was I burning? Underneath my sense of reality had I expected to beat Whit Chapman? Were some of my franker friends right; was I *too* competitive?

No, I had certainly not expected to beat Whit Chapman, not today. But I had never expected to be lapped by *anybody*. Nobody needs that much humility.

Ahead, the Lotus seemed to be getting bigger; and ahead of the Lotus, Bill Burnett's MG was moving at a speed that seemed considerably slower than mine. But the Lotus made no effort to pass.

I tried not to read anything into *that*. Chapman was a lap in front of me and almost a lap in front of his friend Bill; there was no reason to risk a higher speed than he was traveling.

The gap to the Lotus grew shorter through that circuit, and then I realized it was Chapman's last lap. Bill and I had a lap to go; I still had over two miles in which to overtake Bill after Chapman received the checkered flag.

I cut to the speed of the pair ahead, trailing them around the turn that led to the grandstand lane. I was ready when Chapman took his flag and reduced his speed for the extra lap. I cut around him in a burst of third gear acceleration and rode the gear into the big right turn.

The MG came to life. Bill had been loafing, knowing that Whit was no threat, a full lap in front, and also undoubtedly informed from his pit that the third-place car was out of reach.

But now his fourth place was threatened, and he had the MG snarling. Both of us were sliding to the left around the turn, our noses only a few feet apart. He had the line and led me out into the stretch.

It would be nice to make up a stirring account of my victory over Bill on that last lap, but it wouldn't be true. I had the faster car, I'm sure, but he had the touch. He led me out of that first turn and held the lead all the way to the checkered flag, one of the three in the race who hadn't been lapped by Whit Chapman.

My two-man pit crew didn't look as disappointed as I felt. Joe said, "You're improving."

Lin said, "You didn't have quite enough for Bill's car. I can work a few more horses into the bug."

"The car had enough," I told him. "But I didn't."

"It was the car," he insisted. "I'm going to put in even bigger high-speed jets in those carburetors. You're starving out at the top."

I went over to the main refreshment stand for a

hot dog. Mr. Calvano had four men working in this stand alone, and they were busy.

Mr. Calvano was sitting at a table behind the stand, and he waved for me to bring my food over there.

He was smiling as I sat down across from him. "Losing—that's a new feeling for you, Ward."

"I've lost my share," I said.

He chuckled. "Not yet. That Chapman's some driver, isn't he?"

"Tops," I admitted.

"Too good for the club, is he?"

I looked up to find that his face was grave now. I said, "Not good enough, until August. Have you heard something I haven't, sir?"

"About half an hour ago," he said, "one of the boys was making what could have been casual conversation."

I nodded. "So—?"

"He asked me if the canyon land wasn't all I needed for dumping my trash. I admitted it was, but that I had been forced to buy this in the package deal." Mr. Calvano bit off the end of a big cigar. "He asked me if the money I made on the strip was paying my taxes, and I said it was, but not much more than that." Another pause, while he lighted his cigar. "And then this young man asked me if the strip was for sale."

I took a sip of my root beer, waiting.

"I told him it wasn't," Mr. Calvano finished, "not now, at any rate."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said. "With all the new members from the high-rent district we have in the club now, it would be hard to guess which boy it was who talked with you."

"I won't tell you," Mr. Calvano said. "The way I hear it, there's enough friction in the club already."

He had been a friend to the club almost from the beginning of it, and there wasn't much that went on in the SVRC that he didn't know.

Bill Burnett came over to sit next to me, and then Pete Arragon came over with a double root beer and we talked about the race.

And Mr. Calvano told us that he had already taken in more than three times the receipts that the biggest drag had ever brought in, and I knew our ticket sales had matched that proportion.

Bill Burnett said, "Aren't you glad you weren't stubborn, now, Ward? Look at the money you would have cost the club."

"This club wasn't organized to make money," I told him.

"And I didn't rent the strip to the club with that thought in mind," Mr. Calvano added.

Bill grinned. "I know. But Whit Chapman can't seem to understand that, can he?"

Mr. Calvano said nothing.

I said, "What did *that* mean, Bill?"

"Haven't you heard?" he answered. "Whit's trying to get his dad to buy the strip."

I looked at Mr. Calvano. He sighed. I said nothing.

Bill said cheerfully, "Whit will come around. He's a good boy, if a little spoiled. And we're just the men who can straighten him out."

Pete laughed.

Mr. Calvano asked, "What's funny?"

"I always thought it was the underprivileged boys who needed help," Pete said. "It's a comfort to hear that rich people have troubles, too."

We all laughed.

And then Bill said seriously, "When you were seventeen, Ward, and brought back that cup from Oklahoma City, you were a big, big man to a lot of fifteen-year-old kids around this town."

I stared at him. "So—?"

"And one of those fifteen-year-old kids," Bill went on, "was Whit Chapman. You were kind of an idol to him, Ward. And now he has the idea *you* were trying to keep him out of the club. I've explained and explained, but he's a sensitive, stubborn lad."

"Oh, boy—!" I said. "And I suppose that's why he made such a production out of lapping me today, but not you. Well, I hope he grows up before it's too late."

"He's a good boy," Bill said. "He's worth saving, Ward."

"What am I, a social worker? Save him, if he's worth it."

"Until the next election," Bill said, "you're our president."

"But not your father," I said, "and as for Whit

Chapman, he doesn't even want to belong to the club."

"He does," Bill answered. "And he needs the club. Don't play it so cool, Ward. You're not behind the wheel now. I want you to come over to Whit's house with me, tonight, and talk with him."

"All right," I said. "*All right!*"

chapter nine

IT WAS a big house on top of the ridge that overlooked Roap Ranch, San Valdesto's most exclusive district. The ocean and the shoreline for miles were visible from the back yard, and the entire town was visible from where we stood in the parking area of the front yard.

Bill said, "Some view, eh?"

I nodded, looking at the lights of the city.

"Easy does it, now," he cautioned me, as we started for the front door. "This kid has *problems*."

"He's no kid," I said.

"His mother spoils him and his father plays it heavy," Bill went on. "That's bound to confuse a fellow."

"I'm bleeding," I said. "He didn't look confused to me out on that course, today."

Bill chuckled. "Oh, boy! Ward Trenton, the self-made man. Everybody isn't as self-sufficient as you are, Ward."

I said no more. With Bill and his friends, I quite often failed to communicate. We went up to the front door and Bill pressed the button.

The heavy sound of the chimes could be heard from where we stood, and in less than a minute the door opened and a man stood there.

I'm big, Bill's bigger, but this man dwarfed us both. About six and a half feet high and almost that wide, it seemed.

"Well, Bill," he said genially, "come on in."

"Mr. Chapman," Bill said, "this is Ward Trenton, president of our club."

He took my hand and his smile was wry. "The club that turned Whit down?"

"Purely on a technicality, Mr. Chapman," I said. "He'll be eligible to join next month."

Mr. Chapman frowned. "Technicality—?"

Bill said, "No applicant who has had two moving traffic violations in the past year can join the club. Any member who has two violations in one year is automatically expelled."

Mr. Chapman closed the door behind us and called, "Whit, you have company." Quietly, to Bill, he said, "He's been awfully moody lately. I hope you boys are bringing good news." He went out, as Whit came into the living room, where we now waited.

He stood there, almost as tall as his father, but thin as a cornstalk. He asked, "Another complaint?"

"Relax," Bill said. "We want to talk about the club, Whit."

"I'm listening. Do you want to sit down?"

Bill and I sat on a mammoth circular sofa; Whit sat in a chair nearby. Bill said, "We can use a winner in the club, Whit. And a lot of the new members, particularly the young ones, are going to be influenced by your decision. You have quite a fan club among the high-school members."

"I'm not eligible to join your club," Whit said simply.

"You will be, in a month. I brought Ward along tonight to confirm what I told you before; he wasn't the man who made such an issue of your application. He was annoyed with me because I made an issue of it. And we both want you to join the club next month."

A silence of about five seconds, and then Chapman said, "Do you usually put this much pressure on a prospect?"

Bill flushed. I said evenly, "I can't remember that we *ever* asked anyone to join. But we don't often run into prospects who can drive as well as you do."

Whit's smile was cool. "Thank you. And is there a possibility that if Mr. Calvano sells that land to my dad, there might not be a San Valdesto Roadster Club next month?"

Bill stared at him, at me, and back at him. His voice was colder than Whit's smile. "Do you think that's why we're here?"

Whit said evenly, "It's a possibility."

Bill stood up and looked at me. "I'm sorry I suggested this. Let's go."

"Temper, temper," Whit chided him. "Calm down, Bill. You'll have to admit your coming here tonight with the president of the club looks suspicious." He paused. "My mother called Mr. Calvano right after dinner."

I said, "And Bill asked me at the strip, this *afternoon*, to come up here. I thought you and Bill were friends."

"This—afternoon—?" Whit said blankly. "I—"

"Let's go, Ward," Bill said. "I've *had* it!"

I thought Chapman was going to protest once more, but then his thin face stiffened, and he didn't get up to walk to the door with us.

Outside, Mr. Chapman was standing on the front lawn, looking down at the lights. He turned as we came out.

"Well, Bill?" he asked.

"No comment," Bill said.

Mr. Chapman looked at me.

I said, "Whit thinks we only came over because we heard you were going to buy that airport property. Bill's miffed."

Mr. Chapman said, "I'm not buying any property. Bill, Whit needs you. You're a—a balancing influence."

"Thank you, sir," Bill said, and no more.

Mr. Chapman studied me. "Are you Dan Trenton's boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your father's a fine man. I worked with him on that harbor development. What does he think about your club?"

"He's all for it, Mr. Chapman."

"Then it must be all right." He sighed. "Forty years ago, I had seven hundred dollars and two hundred and sixty pounds of muscle. Everything I ever had, I earned. So perhaps you might be able to understand why Whit and I aren't always in agreement. But he's a gutty kid, and my son, and I love him. I hope you boys can get through to him. Good night." He turned and looked down at the lights once more.

We went over to the MG and climbed in. Bill turned on the headlights and swung in a U-turn, and the lights silhouetted Mr. Chapman against that black sky, a lonely giant on his hill.

I thought of Pete Arragon, the laughing boy, and his remark about rich people having troubles, too. Pete and Juan were probably the poorest boys in the club, but I couldn't remember a time when Pete wasn't laughing. But then, to keep the record straight, I couldn't remember many times when Juan *was* laughing.

Down the long hill, around the wide curves, the MG rode, past the big homes on three-acre lots, past the country club.

Bill said, "Would it be unreasonable for me to suggest Whit Chapman will have to make the next move if he wants to be a member?"

Blow hot, blow cold, Bill Burnett. . . . I said, "We'll talk about it tomorrow. We have a whole month to talk about it. Are you sorry we let your friends in, Bill?"

"I don't know," he said. "It's—all mixed up in my mind."

"I'm happy about it," I said. "I was getting bored with drags."

"Man," he said, "are *you* ever changeable!"

I didn't laugh. He was serious. "I'm young," I said, "and open to reason. And I have you to keep me consistent."

It took him about ten seconds to get that one. And then we were both laughing.

When he dropped me off, he said, "Meeting tomorrow night. I'll see you there." He paused. "And—thanks for the try. Too bad we missed."

There was a light in the garage behind the house, and I went back there. Lin was working on the bug.

"Any luck?" he asked me.

"Not much. He thought we were worried because his dad might buy the property and Bill took offense—" I shrugged.

Lin was cleaning a wrench with a piece of waste. "You should have a few more horses now. The boys at Ventura are running a race at their airport on the twenty-first. Are we going down?"

"We are. How else can I learn? Are you happy with that engine, Lin?"

"I love it," he said. "It's an education to take it

apart." He reached up to turn off the light. "But I've had enough of it tonight. Early shift tomorrow at the station."

He worked from seven until noon the next day; I worked from three in the afternoon until eight. It took me another half an hour to clean up and fifteen minutes to drive over to the club garage.

Terry had opened the meeting, and it had been going on for about three-quarters of an hour by the time I arrived. Terry seemed disturbed about something.

I sat down next to Bud Ellinger and whispered, "What's been going on?"

"The new members have been raising a fuss about Whit Chapman's eligibility," Bud told me. "Terry laid down the law on that."

"Didn't Bill Burnett say something?"

"He's not here."

Terry saw me now and called from the front of the room, "Do you want to take over now, Ward?"

A ripple of laughter moved through the room. I stood up and said, "No. But on Whit Chapman's eligibility, he'll be eligible next month. Last night Bill Burnett and I went to see Whit. We can always use a winner. We did something we have never done before, to my knowledge. We tried to pressure him into joining."

"Now?" somebody called from the floor.

I turned to face the heckler. "He's not eligible now. We want him in August. He—didn't seem interested."

A murmur, and I said, "Any time a single member gets more important than this club, we no longer have a club. That goes for prospective members, too."

Somebody called, "If Mr. Chapman buys that airport, you won't have a club."

A wave of laughter.

It was one of the new members, and I faced him squarely. I said, "Didn't you mean to say, 'We won't have a club'—or don't you consider yourself a member?"

No laughter this time. A dead silence.

I said, "I'm waiting for an answer."

"All right," he said, "*we!*"

"There'll be a club," I said, "with or without the strip. Mr. Chapman told me last night he has no intention of buying that property. And third—" I looked around the room at them all, "—we don't shout out questions from the floor here unless we're recognized by the chairman of the meeting. This is not a *gang*, it's a *club*. Thank you." I sat down.

Bud Ellinger chuckled and whispered, "I guess you told them."

"And probably lost a few of them," I said. "I wish these kids would get over the idea that *anything* can be bought."

"Patience, patience, Ward," Bud said soothingly. "They'll learn. I did, Terry did, Bill Burnett did. And we're all on your side."

Against one stubborn, skinny, sensitive, spoiled

kid, who drives like Fangio, I thought. *It's not really fair. . . .*

The business meeting was over. Terry said, "We have refreshments for all, even the bad losers. Meeting adjourned."

As we stood up, I looked toward the refreshment table, and who should be setting up the oven but Juan Arragon! I went right over there.

"I'm a little late," he told me. "The hot dogs will be ready in five minutes."

"Glad to see you, late or early," I told him. "How'd you do at Bakersfield?"

"I won," he said. "What else? You weren't there, so I won." He smiled. "I hear you were lapped at the airport."

"You have big ears," I told him, "and a sharp tongue, but I'm glad you're here."

"Thank you." He continued to smile. "I got here in time to hear your little speech. You may not be our champ any more, but you're still our leader. Have the new boys been giving you trouble?"

"Nothing we can't handle," I answered. "You and I and Terry can take care of any problems we're likely to meet." I paused. "That is, if you're back to stay."

"I'm back," he said. "I saw a wrecked MG at Casey's I'll bet I could get cheap. Pete and I could rebuild her better than new."

"You're joking," I said. "Not you, Juan—not *you* in a sports car—!"

He shrugged. "Why not, if it's cheap enough?"

The oven was ready; he put in a dozen frankfurters, closed the door, and flipped the switch. In seconds, they were steaming. He had built that infra-red oven; he would rebuild the MG better than new, just as he had said.

I repeated, "I'm glad you're back, Juan. We all missed you."

Practically all the members stayed for the refreshments; if there was any resentment among the new boys, it didn't interfere with their appetites.

Terry McGovern came over to stand next to me in line for the second helping. He said quietly, "Our problems look smaller. And now, with Juan back, what problems are left?"

"Whit Chapman," I said. "He needs this club and the club can certainly use him."

He sighed. "He'll have to make his own decision about joining, Ward. According to Bill, you really tried to swing him last night."

I agreed with a nod.

"And," Terry went on, "again according to Bill, Chapman thought you boys came there because you heard his dad was buying the airport property."

"That's the way it was. But when I explained why that wasn't true, Chapman seemed sorry that he had said what he had. But Bill was steaming by this time—so we left."

"He had a right to steam. Don't you think the next move should be Chapman's? We don't *beg* anybody to join this club."

"We won't beg," I said, "but I'd hate to lose him."

He frowned. "Why? What's so important about Whit Chapman?"

It wasn't easy to admit, but it was about time I admitted it. I said simply, "He's the best driver I've ever seen, amateur or pro."

chapter ten

A WEEK before the Ventura meet, Lin suggested that we go down and look over the course. It was a Friday afternoon and neither of us was working. So we drove the thirty-five miles to Ventura.

The Ventura Vikings had started as a rod club, too; but, as the driver of the Fiat had told me, they had a few members who had converted to sports cars, and this group was running the road race. They, too, were getting new members since they had built a sports-car course.

The Ventura course was about a quarter-mile shorter than ours, with only five turns, and it was open, so Lin and I cruised it in the red bug.

The sharpest turn could be handled in second gear; it looked likely to me that better average speeds would be run here than on our course.

The brother who had defeated me in the novice race was there trying out his Fiat, and he

told me he was in charge of the competition a week from Sunday.

"We've already had half a dozen entry applications from the Solvang Scramblers," he told me. "Get your gang on the ball."

"We'll be here," I said. "Don't worry. I'll remind the boys that applications close next Friday."

"Do that," he said. "And the track will be open all next week if they want any practice runs." He grinned. "We intend to beat you, and we don't want to give you cause for alibis."

The Solvang Scramblers and the Vikings had always been fierce competitors. The last two years we had enjoyed unusual success in drags all over the Tri-Counties area, and I could guess that both the Scramblers and the Vikings were determined that the SVRC dominance on the track was going to end in the sports-car events.

Sunday morning Juan came over to pick up Lin. He wanted Lin's expert opinion on the battered MG he hoped to buy and repair. I was working the morning shift at the station, so I couldn't go along.

When Lin came to relieve me at noon, he told me Juan had found a bargain, but there would be at least two week's work on it and it couldn't possibly be ready for next Sunday's go at Ventura.

He shook his head in wonder. "Juan—in a sports car!" He laughed. "You know what I'm waiting to see now?"

"What?"

"That two hundred and ten pounds of muscle under a beret."

"Never!" I said, and we were both laughing. And then I added seriously, "What I'm waiting to see is Whit Chapman as a member of the SVRC."

"I think," Lin said, just as seriously, "you'll see that about the same time you see Juan wearing a beret. He's a strange, stubborn lad, that Whit Chapman."

"Nobody in the world," I said, "is any more stubborn than Juan Arragon, and he came around. I'm not giving up on Chapman."

"You're certainly in his fan club, aren't you?" Lin said. "I can remember when you weren't."

I said, "I've always admired a good man in a hot car. I don't have to like him to admire him."

Lin was quiet for a second, and then he said, "There's a distinction between Juan and Whit, I think. Juan realizes the club is more important than any single member. Juan always did realize that."

"Maybe Chapman will, too," I said, "when he becomes a member."

Lin went to work and I went home. A warm, dull Sunday afternoon yawned at me. The folks were visiting in Solvang and the house seemed lonely; I drove out to the strip.

Bill Burnett was there with his MG, and Len Aberg and Flip Donovan. Bill and Len would be driving at Ventura; Flip would be in Bill's pit.

I ran five laps in the bug and it was a joy. She had never performed better. A part of any skill is

confidence, and my confidence as a driver in this new field was slowly growing.

As I watched Len and Bill take their turns, I realized they, too, were improving. The SVRC would field a respectable team at Ventura. The boys in the club had always understood engines and traction and their cars' acceleration potential. So they hadn't started in kindergarten in the sports-car field. They had started in sixth grade and were learning fast.

I was off Tuesday afternoon and went down to Ventura alone to run the course, to get the lines through the turns. Thursday, both Lin and I were off, and we both made the trip.

It was a busy course this afternoon, mostly Vikings and Scramblers. There were a few drivers from the Los Angeles area, including Ken Stiles.

Stiles had always been a great driver; what impressed me was the improvement of the club drivers I saw there. If the SVRC was going to maintain its local dominance, we would have to continue to improve.

Len Aberg already was making plans for a three-club meet in late August, with points to be awarded for the first four places in each event, and both the Vikings and the Scramblers had seemed enthusiastic about the idea. The red-hot county competition we had built up in the drags was carrying over into this new field.

There is nothing that gives a club more unity than outside competition worthy of the name.

Though that wasn't their intention, the Scramblers and the Vikings were doing the SVRC a great favor.

Out on the course, now, the silver Jaguar of Whit Chapman was streaming along the distant straightaway. That was the cream of San Valdesto; I hoped he'd eventually decide to join us.

Lin and I watched him traverse a tricky S-turn, accelerate for a shorter straightaway, and then swing smoothly through a left hairpin. I stood there silently, lost in admiration.

And then Lin said, "We know how *he* looks. Climb in, boy, and let's see how *you* look!"

I took five laps, one easy, the next four at a gradually increased speed. I was getting the feel of this bug now and its eager little engine, and beginning to lose the stiff feeling that the horses of my heavy Chev had built into my wrists.

Touch was the essence of this sport, the feel of traction and the sense of line through the turns. It was a much more delicate business than drag racing, and it involved a more intricate strategy and greater skill. Whit had been almost right; he had called drag racing about ninety per cent car and ten per cent driver skill. I was ready to admit it was about eighty-five per cent car. This new sport was balanced the other way.

Of course, at Le Mans or Monaco, with the cars so close, some of them identical, and the drivers the finest in the world, the ratio could swing either way. But here, in club racing, in the production cate-

gories, driver skill was the paramount ingredient for victory.

Lin had a watch on me for my final lap, and when I came in he told me, "There are some faster boys out there this afternoon, but very few of them from the Scramblers or the Vikings. Ward, maybe you'll be our champ again—some day."

Ken Stiles went blasting past the pits in a Corvette; Whit Chapman was getting his Jag ready to take home. These were the champions. I couldn't hope to match them for a long, long time.

Lin and I worked double shifts Friday and Saturday so we would be able to make the trip on Sunday. Both of us were completely bushed Saturday night; we went to bed as soon as we came home from work.

Sunday morning we were in Ventura before eight o'clock, in line for the technical inspection. The Vikings didn't have enough qualified examiners of their own, so Len Alberg and Flip Donovan had volunteered to help.

As soon as they were through with our car, Lin joined Flip and Len for an hour while I put the bug through her paces in a few exploratory laps.

I had never felt more confident, and Lin had the Porsche tuned to her finest pitch. Mr. Petersen had brought a new set of tires over to the station on Friday, and we had put them on after work. The car was ready; the rest was up to me.

When I came back to the pit, Lin was still work-

ing on inspection. I went over to Terry McGovern's pit, where he was talking with Bud Ellinger.

Terry said, with a grin, "It's like old times, Ward. The club spirit is coming back."

I agreed with a nod.

Bud said, "But with Glen Allis here, and the Stiles brothers, we're not going to take many firsts."

"Neither will the Scramblers nor the Vikings," Terry said. "I don't expect us to beat the cream." He paused. "Not this year, anyway. Now, next year—"

"But we've competed with the top rodders," Bud protested.

"Not the first year," Terry reminded him. "Patience, man. We have a lot to learn about *this* sport."

Terry was right, as usual, but no competitor likes to admit he has any superiors on the course against whom he hasn't a chance. In racing, though, the all-out effort to win can lead a man into situations beyond his skill and into catastrophe. Somewhere between the speed a man needs and the limit of his calculated risk lies the winning zone. Very few of the SVRC boys had found that happy pace as yet.

Lin and I had brought our lunch; Ventura doesn't have the refreshment-stand facilities that Mr. Calvano has at our course. We ate in the shadow of the gasoline storage sheds with about twenty other boys from clubs all over the county.

There were a lot of jokes and plenty of laughs.

But against the sound of the laughter was the whine of perfectly tuned engines running their qualifying trials, the squeal of tortured tires, the decompression bark of downshifting speedsters. We all knew this was a serious business, competing at these speeds; our laughter was a much-needed release from the tensions of our competitive responsibilities.

There were no Formula cars here today, only the production cars and the modified cars under 1600 cubic centimeters. The modified race opened the show.

A driver from Solvang won it in a Cooper Climax, beating a Lotus MK 15 in the last lap, after the two of them had changed leads five times in the ten-lap race. The Lotus was a Long Beach car; in our unofficial three-club point standings, the Solvang Scramblers were out in front.

The bug and I were in the next one, and so was my Ventura conqueror from the Fourth of July. In the row next to me, the Solvang redhead in the Triumph called over, "You'd better be better today."

"I plan to," I told him. "Tell our Ventura friend that; he beat us both last time."

From the row ahead, the Ventura boy in the Fiat looked back to grin at us. "You two are lucky. You won't have to eat my dust, only because there is no dust."

The Lotus that Whit Chapman had driven on the

Fourth was in this race, but Whit's cousin had decided to drive it himself today. Whit stood next to him on the starting grid, talking quietly.

Bud Ellinger called out, "How about some advice for me, Whit? Your cousin doesn't need it."

Chapman grinned, and said, "And you wouldn't listen to it. Good luck to all of you." He went back to the pits as the starter began to check the field.

It was a ten-car race, all production cars, all under 1600 cubic centimeters of displacement. The cream of the field was probably the Lotus; in Whit's hands it would have been unbeatable. We would find out today if his cousin had a comparable skill.

I had a feeling that no car had been as well-prepared as our Porsche, and I was determined to give it the best ride of its racing career.

I was starting in the second row, with the inside line to the first turn. That put me into an ideal challenger's spot. The Fiat in the row ahead seemed to be the best combination of car and driver among the entrants I knew. He would be my pacesetter.

The starter was satisfied now. The flag rose, paused—and waved.

That Fiat took off like a quarter horse, leaving its flanking cars motionless for a second, and I followed his lead. The torque of the Porsche gave me the edge on those two cars in the straightaway before the first turn.

We rode into that turn as a clean second, only

ten feet behind the flying Fiat. At this pace, I was glad to have the new tires. There would be some rubber burned today.

Judging by a one-race record, the Ventura driver ahead was a better man than his brother in his matching car. His brother wasn't entered in this event; perhaps they planned a pair of firsts for the prestige of their club.

Perhaps, if the Porsche continued to perk and I was better than I had been last time, I could spoil that plan. I was basking in this sweet thought along the short stretch when the Lotus shot past me.

Whit Chapman's cousin must have shared my thoughts about the Ventura driver, and he had the car to do it. He moved past the Fiat well short of the next turn.

We had a hare-and-hounds going now, and the Lotus was the hare. I came up almost even with the Fiat as we chased the hare down the longest straightaway.

Chapman's cousin had the car and he had the courage. For three laps, he made our cause look hopeless as he set a pace that we did our best to match, his oil fumes coming back to taunt us, and the shriek of his tortured tires seeming to scream defiance at the field.

In those early laps our speed gave us a big jump on the field. As I came past the pits to finish the fourth lap, there was no car in sight in my rear-view mirror.

And then, on the fifth lap, the man in the Lotus

added the extra mile an hour that lost him the precarious traction he had been maintaining. He spun out on the third turn, knocking over a hay bale, and was forced to go into a long loop to get back onto the course.

I was riding second, now, behind the Ventura Fiat. That matched my finishing position on the Fourth, second behind the Fiat. This afternoon, though, there was an added ingredient. That Lotus would get back on the course, and Chapman's cousin didn't seem to be the kind of driver who would be content with third place. It seemed like a good time for me to go out after the Fiat.

I moved up closer and studied his line through the turns. I could see nothing that would give me an edge there. My best hope was to get him right after a turn, hoping the torque of the Porsche would put him safely behind before we both needed to decelerate for the next turn.

The Fiat was well aware of my plan, it seemed. He took the turns easily, saving the horses for a burst of acceleration into the following stretches. I moved closer, hoping for a break, as the laps unwound, and the vision of the Lotus behind grew bigger in my mirror.

As we arrowed past the pits to finish the eighth lap, Lin's signal told me something I already knew. The Lotus was closing in from behind.

There were two laps left, and the Lotus was still coming on. It would be necessary now to extend the calculation of my calculated risk. On the fourth

turn, before the longest straightaway, I made my bid.

Luckily for me, he had made the turn a little wider than usual, and he lost a few feet in his slide and left a small gap below. The Porsche never faltered, responding instantly to the pressure of my foot, sliding out under full gun, perfectly aligned and digging. We came into the long straightaway leading the parade.

The boy from Ventura didn't give up; the Vikings never do. With a lap and a third still to go, anything could happen to the Porsche and the Fiat intended to be ready if it did.

Lin can take credit for that one. The Porsche went singing along without fuss or strain, her new jets feeding her powerfully at the top, her engine never balking under the flood of deceleration.

We went on to a Trenton win for the SVRC, a *Lin* Trenton win.

chapter eleven

"WINNER!" Lin said. "You looked good out there, champ."

"It was the car," I answered. "You were right about those jets. You won that one, brother."

He smiled. "Don't be modest. I'm too old to adjust to a new personality. That Lotus looked like a cinch winner for a while, there."

"Is he a member of the club?" I asked.

Lin shook his head. "He's waiting for Whit to join. We can use both of them, can't we?"

I climbed from the car and took off my helmet. I didn't answer Lin. The tension I had built up over ten laps was beginning to seep out. My knees trembled and I went over to sit down on Lin's toolbox.

The Ventura boy waved congratulations from his pit, and I waved back wearily. Lin asked, "What's the matter? Sun?"

"Tension," I said. "Ten laps of this is a lot

rougher than a quarter-mile of straightaway."

Lin brought over the water jug and a paper cup. "You'll have to learn to pace yourself. You'll have to learn your limits."

Terry McGovern and Bud Ellinger came over to congratulate me and so did both Arragons. Some of the new members came over. We were a club once more.

I didn't fool myself that my victory had been scored against the cream of the drivers here today. Ken Stiles and Whit Chapman hadn't been in that race, nor Glen Allis, nor any of the other experienced boys who had come up from the southern end of the state. Most of these boys drove the big-bore production jobs almost exclusively, and *their* race was going to be the real class of the meet.

But I *was* a rookie and I *had* won; when my relapse was over, I must admit I felt a little smug.

Out on the grid now, the B and C cars were being trundled into line. These were the cars and drivers that had brought over two thousand spectators out to a small-town road race. Ken Stiles and his brother Ted were in the first row, with Whit Chapman. I had defeated Ted at San Valdesto only because his Elva had left the course. He wasn't driving an Elva today; he was behind the wheel of an Aston Martin DB4. Ken was driving a Corvette.

Glenn Allis and Duke Ritter made up the second row; the rows behind were filled with club drivers, three cars in the third row, two in the fourth.

Those last two rows were never in the race. Ken Stiles, Whit Chapman, and Glenn Allis made a three-car dogfight of it from the drop of the flag. Well behind the leaders, Ted Stiles and Duke Ritter waged a bitter duel for fourth place, seesawing for the lead through six wild laps.

But the real race was a quarter of a lap ahead of Ted and Ritter by this time, and the crowd had no eyes for a fourth-place battle. And as far as I could judge, the two who were a quarter of a lap behind were both traveling at a better pace than I had traveled to win.

Lin was clocking the leaders, and I asked him, "Get a one-lap reading on Ted Stiles and Ritter, will you?"

He nodded and waited for them to come around.

A couple minutes later, he said, "They're traveling at about the speed you traveled."

"About—?"

He shrugged. "Maybe a little faster." He smiled. "You won that race, Ward. Don't compete in races where you aren't entered."

"I wasn't competing," I told him stiffly. "I was measuring myself."

"You're six feet high," he told me, "and six seconds slow. But you're learning. Don't forget, man to man, you beat Ted at San Valdesto. And right now Ted is beating Duke Ritter."

And right now Whit Chapman was beating both Ken Stiles and Glenn Allis. Both Ken and Glenn were wheeling Corvettes and, for the past three

months around the country, those Corvettes had been taking the Jaguar XK-E. In the tenth lap, Ken made his final bid, coming out of the turn before the long straightaway with all four tires smoking.

He had the horses and he had the inches; there weren't many men in America he wouldn't have taken in that try. The man he didn't take was Whitney Sutherland Chapman, Jr. Whit stuck to his line and whipped the Jag through the turn as smoothly as a hydroplane, coming into the long run a full six feet ahead of the Corvette.

That was the race, right there, another cup for Whit Chapman.

Lin said, "Measure yourself, brother."

"Not against him, not this year," I said.

"And to think," Lin went on, "*you* used to be *his* idoll"

I used a line I hadn't used for weeks. I said, "Horses for courses."

Lin laughed. "Drag strip, here we come. Humble brother, let me buy you a Coke."

We went over to the machine as Whit toured the course, displaying the checkered flag, drawing applause all along the line. Lin took a bottle from the machine, uncapped it, and handed it to me with a small bow.

Juan came over to say, "That Chapman is a genius. Why isn't he in the club?"

"He isn't eligible yet, Juan. And when he is, next

month, he'll have to make the first move. We've already made ours."

"He could join the Scramblers or the Vikings," Juan protested. "We can't afford to lose a man like that."

I stared at him blankly, consciously quiet.

"All right," he said, "I'm inconsistent. Who isn't? I'm just going with the tide, that's all."

"No man," I said, "is bigger than the club, tide or not. Have a Coke. Lin's buying."

"Stick-in-the-mud Trenton," Juan grumbled. "Old status quo."

I had to laugh at that one, coming from Juan Arragon. And so did Lin.

"I'll buy my own Coke," Juan said gruffly. He reached into his pocket for a coin.

"And one for your buddies, too?" I teased him. "It's a hot day, old friend."

"All right, all right," he said. "Wait'll I get that MG perking. I'll cool you cuties."

We drank our drinks and didn't talk for a few seconds. And then, as we put our bottles back into the rack, Lin said, "Why don't we go over and congratulate Chapman? It's the only decent thing to do."

I looked over toward where the slim, tall man was leaning against his slim, low car, talking with Bill Burnett. They seemed to be friends again; why couldn't I be?

"Let's go," Juan said. "A kind word now can

mean a cup for the club next month." He led the way.

Chapman shook each of our hands in turn, thanking us. And adding to me, "Congratulations, yourself. You're getting better by the minute."

"I've a long way to go," I said.

"To you, he means," Lin added.

Chapman grinned. I tried to. Juan said, "Get that Stiles in the feature, now, and build up the name of San Valdesto."

Subtle, that Juan was, like a rhinoceros.

"I'll certainly try," Whit promised.

We went back to our pit. The next race was a consolation and we weren't in it. But the consolation was on the grid and ready to go, and we would be in the following race, the feature of our class, the first four cars from the two earlier races.

The redhead from Solvang won the consolation, Bud Ellinger was second in his Sunbeam. Unofficially, the SVRC had more points than the Vikings or the Scramblers.

There were no other cars in the modified category running here today; the next race would be the small-bore feature, 1600 cubic centimeters and under, and yours truly would start in the first row.

My confidence was growing. I hoped my skill was growing at the same pace. This was a rougher field than I had faced in the earlier race, all of them drivers who had finished well. I had competed against quite a number of these drivers on the strip; their skills were almost as new as mine.

As there is a line between risk and skill, there is also a line between confidence and overconfidence. I might have been guilty of this last vice when I started that race.

I had the inside line in the front row, and it gave me the edge on the first turn. I led the pack through the turn and went zooming along the first stretch at a pace that would require a double miracle of downshifting and braking for the second, sharper turn.

It wasn't my afternoon for miracles. A hundred feet short of the turn, I realized that my speed was too great. Confidence oozed out of me as I hit the brakes too hard and went sliding toward the rubber cones that marked the curve.

I sent three of the cones spinning, narrowly missed a hay bale, and wound up with all four wheels off the course. The parade was out of sight before I was back on the track.

It had been a thirteen-car field, and I was riding thirteenth a third of the way through the first lap. To go from first place to thirteenth place in that short a distance is not easy to do. Climbing back to first place would be even harder.

One thing was certain, I was no longer overconfident.

Before the lap was run, I had climbed to twelfth place, but not through any skill of mine. Ted Stiles had spun out in an MG on the fifth turn.

A play-by-play report on that race would be boring; six laps later I had climbed to seventh place,

and the car riding sixth had a quarter-lap lead. He wasn't loafing. Seventh place seemed to be my logical finishing position.

In the eighth lap we rode past Bill Burnett, stalled just short of the third turn with a burned-out coil; we were now in sixth place. That was where we finished.

In the pits, Lin asked. "What happened?"

"Didn't you see it? I didn't make the second turn."

"I saw that," Lin said patiently. "But *then* what happened? I had a watch on you, Ward. You were crawling!"

"I wasn't making much worse time than I made in the other race."

"If," he said slowly, "you had matched the lap times of that other race, you would have been crowding for the lead in the ninth lap. Did you—get nervous?"

"Do you mean *scared*? No."

A silence.

"All right," I said sharply, "Maybe I was over-cautious. It's likely to shake a man, not making a turn at the speed I was traveling. But the race is over."

He opened his mouth to say something and then closed it again. He shrugged and went over to his tool chest.

I climbed out slowly, nettled, knowing he was speaking the truth, ashamed to admit that shrieking slide had taken some of the starch out of me. After

that, I had seriously lowered the calculation of my calculated risk.

Not a San Valdesto car had finished better than fifth and the smiles were wide in the pits of our competitors. Jibes floated back and forth in the oil-tainted air. The SVRC was going to be humbled today; our rivals were sure of that.

Juan came over to say, "Tough luck, amigo. You looked good for about a third of a lap there."

"Thank you," I said. "There'll be other races."

"In August," he agreed. "Do you think Chapman will join by then?"

"I don't know. We can win without him."

"You're bitter," he said quietly. He smiled. "It isn't easy to lose, is it?"

I didn't answer. I wiped my neck and face with a clean towel and said, "The big one is coming up. This one I want to see." I went over to the ladder.

The tigers were lining up on the grid now for the feature event of the afternoon—Ken Stiles, Glenn Allis, Whit Chapman, Fred Harvey—the cool boys in the big cars. This should be a dogfight, fifteen laps of first-class competition.

Aston Martin, Corvette, Jaguar, Mercedes and a Porsche Carrera, all names that made sweet music, and they were being played by ranking musicians.

"The majors, eh?" Juan said quietly. "We'll make it one day, Ward. You're out of the bush leagues already."

"Not yet," I said. "Climb up here where you can see."

All the engines were turning, their tail pipes sending out the faintly muffled, resonant throb of fine machinery expertly prepared for combat.

"Money cars," Juan said. "Even second-hand, they're expensive."

"All cars are expensive," I said, "including hot rods. The point is—are they worth it?"

He stared out at the lustrous, clean-lined beauties on the grid and sighed. "I guess they are. Maybe—some day—"

I laughed. "That's what keeps us going, Juan—that *some day*. Hope, that's what gives us strength."

The starter had his flag raised now and there was a hush in the crowd noise, a moment of silence before the flag fell and the sky trembled from the sound of all those big engines coming to full voice in one shattering second.

The smell of burning rubber was mixed with the oil taint in the air, and at least five cars seemed to turn into one as they funneled into the first turn.

Our San Valdesto champion, in his silver Jag, came out of that tangle in first place and winging, his sleek speedster streaking down the stretch toward the second turn that had been my nemesis.

His speed was greater than mine had been, I was sure. And his car was heavier. But Whit Chapman spanned that turn as though it were routine, his tires squealing but his car's nose as steady as the

prow of an ocean liner, as he absorbed all the dangerous sway with a controlled power slide.

"A genius," Juan said. "And rich, too. Why is he always so sarcastic?"

"I don't know. Why are you? This one's in the bag already and the race has hardly started."

"Nothing's ever won before the checkered flag," Juan said. "That's a hot field, amigo."

"The first five are hot," I said. "The others are club drivers."

"Chapman could be a club driver."

"Get off my back, Juan. If you want him, you ask him."

Already, Whit had a three-length lead on Glenn Allis, and Allis was being crowded by Ken Stiles. Another length behind them, Harvey's Mercedes was holding the pace. Jack Teller, in fifth place, was slowly losing ground on the leaders.

In the second lap, Stiles moved past Allis and took off after Whit. By the time the fourth lap rolled around, those two had such a commanding length on the field, all interest was centered on them.

They put on a great show, their cars never more than two lengths apart, neither car ever out of control—top equipment in expert hands. And then, on the eleventh lap, Whit's car sputtered for a split second and Stiles moved by.

Stiles had the lead, now, and the freedom to run his pace and his strategy. Whit maintained Stiles'

pace for only one lap, and then must have realized Stiles couldn't maintain it. He dropped back almost a hundred feet, with only three laps to go.

"Is he quitting?" Juan asked.

"He's waiting," I said. "That boy *never* quits."

"Waiting—Waiting for what?"

"For Stiles to overextend himself on the grandstand turn," I guessed aloud. "He's been pushing it a little heavy the last two laps."

It had been a good guess. In the fourteenth lap, Stiles' Corvette started to slide toward the temporary fence on the grandstand turn, and for a split second it seemed he was out of control.

Behind him, the silver Jag seemed to jump, eager for the opportunity. Here was Whit's best, last chance.

But in that heart-stopping second, one of the teen-age spectators behind the temporary fence must have panicked. He ran for the far side of the tight turn—directly in the path of Whit Chapman's streaking car.

Chapman had one of three choices. He could shoot straight ahead, for the already scattering crowd. He could hit the brakes and slide into Ken's momentarily motionless Corvette. Or he could smash into the concrete wall that fenced the airport parking lot.

He chose the wall, as the crowd gasped. The Jag smashed it head on, went up on two wheels as Whit fell out—and then began to burn. The crowd screamed, and the red flag waved wildly, and I real-

ized Chapman had really had *four* chances. He could have hit the teen-ager. He had chosen the only sure way to protect everybody else.

I was sick as I scrambled down from the ladder; the wail of the fire-truck siren blended with that of the ambulance.

And in that tragic moment, I remembered his dad standing in front of the house and saying, "But he's a gutty kid, and my son, and I love him."

I started to pray.

chapter twelve

MR. CHAPMAN came down the steps from the second floor as Bill Burnett and I waited in the lobby of the hospital.

He came over to where we stood and said, "He'll be all right. He's staying overnight for observation, but he'll be leaving in the morning." He took a deep breath. "What happened, Bill?"

"I didn't see it," Bill told him. "Ward saw it."

I said, "Some crazy kid thought it would be safer on the other side of the track when Stiles skidded. He ran right in front of Whit's car." I paused. "Mr Chapman, your son made a very courageous decision. He had a number of choices open to him. He picked the road that could hurt only him. He didn't have more than a tenth of a second to make the choice."

Mr. Chapman looked at me thoughtfully. "That's quite a speech, Ward. You—sound—impressed."

"When you told me, in front of your house, that

he was a gutty kid," I said, "You spoke the truth. I don't think I'd have had the courage to do what he did." I paused again. "I—I thought it was the—well, his finish."

Mr. Chapman continued to stare at me. His voice was low and strained. "It's—a concussion, minor. He'll be all right. You boys won't be able to see him tonight, but I'll be sure to tell him what you said, Ward. He tells me that you were one of his heroes when he was in high school."

"He's one of mine, now," I answered.

"I'll tell him that," Mr. Chapman promised. "And thank you both for coming here. I hope Whit decides to join that club of yours."

Bill and I had stayed in Ventura after the race, while Lin drove the bug home. Now it was dark and, as we walked down to Bill's car, he asked, "Hungry?"

"Starved," I said. "But the boys at home will be waiting to hear about Whit."

"I'll call from the restaurant," he told me. "I've got to eat now."

From a Ventura restaurant, he phoned Len Aberg and asked him to spread the word that Whit would be all right. As I sat and waited for him to finish the call, a reaction from the last four hours of tension must have hit me. I was cold and trembling when Bill came back to the table.

"You look sick," he said. "Something wrong?"

"Reaction," I said. "I can still see that Jag heading for the wall. It was like—like suicide."

Bill said quietly, "I've known that stubborn gent since he was eight years old and I was ten. Unfortunately, he was born rich, or he'd be his father all over again, a natural competitor. But when there's nothing to compete for, when your mother gives you every silly thing you ask for—" Bill shrugged.

"Nobody's perfect," I said. "You're not exactly a Dale Carnegie model yourself, Bill. And I'm certainly not America's smilingest man."

"You don't have to defend Whit Chapman to me," Bill said. "He's one of my best friends."

The waitress came then, and I ordered a big bowl of clam chowder. After that was down and my chill gone, I would decide what I wanted to eat.

The chowder was good, and I put a small steak on top of it. I was almost back to normal when we had finished eating.

But before we climbed into Bill's car for the trip home, I said, "Keep it under fifty, will you? It's been a bad day."

He smiled. "I planned to. I was going to suggest we turn the SVRC into a bicycle and hiking club, but we'll feel more reasonable tomorrow, I'm sure."

On the ride home I went over it in my mind, trying to understand why this one accident should have affected me as much as it had. There had been accidents on the drag strip, with blown tires or exploding engines, that had resulted in more serious injuries. Whit had a slight concussion and would be whole again tomorrow.

It was his decision, I knew, the choice he had

made. A spoiled kid, with all the material possessions most people never get, had made the exactly right decision instinctively, had chosen the one path that reduced his own chance of survival to the minimum in order to protect others.

Would I have had the courage? It was more than courage; it was nobility. Would I—? Would anyone else I knew?

"What are you thinking about?" Bill asked me.

"About courage. About Whit Chapman."

"So was I," Bill said, "but please don't ask me what I would have done. I'm not man enough to answer."

"Leading the soft life he's led," I wondered aloud, "what put the steel into him?"

I couldn't guess," Bill said. "And it doesn't matter. He has it and it makes him special."

Bill had called it, he was special. Hadn't I sensed it the first day I had seen him, poised and cool and competent? And proud. And lonely?

I asked, "What day in August did Whit have that traffic violation last year?"

"I forget," Bill said. "I think it was the first week in August, though."

"Look it up tomorrow," I said.

Bill chuckled. "Yes, Mr. President. What schemes are going through your devious mind now?"

"I'm going to eat crow," I said. "I'm going to gorge myself on humble pie."

He chuckled again. "The great Ward Trenton stoops to conquer."

"To conquer—?"

"Anything to get a winner, right?"

"Watch it," I said. "You know me better than that."

A silence, and then, gravely, "I apologize, Ward. You're right. He needs us more than we need him, and I hope that doesn't sound smug. He needs Juan and Pete and windy Flip Donovan, just as Terry McGovern did when this club was founded."

"You're getting the message," I said. "You're brighter than I realized."

"I'm bound to be," he answered. "Would you like to match last year's grades against mine?"

He had me there. He had the last word, as usual.

When he dropped me off, he said, "Len Aberg's having a meeting of the Competition Committee Thursday night. I think you ought to be there."

"I plan to. We're going to have to buy some fencing. We don't want a repeat of what happened at Ventura."

"My thought exactly. I'll see you Thursday night, then."

He drove away, and I walked up to the house. There was a light in the living room. My dad and Lin were in there, playing backgammon.

My dad looked up and smiled. "We got the good news. It could have been worse, couldn't it?"

"It certainly could have. Do you know Mr. Chapman well?"

"Fairly well. We worked together on that harbor business."

"What kind of a man is he?"

My dad frowned thoughtfully. "I'm not sure I completely understand him. This much I'll say—he's frank to the point of rudeness, *almost*. And his courage is—well, legendary. Whatever he is, he's *all man*."

"And two yards wide," Lin added. "Whit certainly didn't inherit his muscle."

They went on with their game; I went up to my room. Bill had mentioned what the club had done for Terry McGovern. It had done as much for Bill. And for me? Yes. And for Juan and Pete. It had made us, in a sense, all brothers; rich man, poor man, middle man. I hope I'm not sounding too pretentious in suggesting it had made us all *Americans*, in the original, finer sense of that word. Out on the strip, a man was exactly as good as his skill and his courage made him, and his bank account or lack of it couldn't change his time by a thousandth of a second.

If Whit Chapman's generous parents had given him nothing to compete for, we could fill the lack at the SVRC. Rich or poor, he would need to compete some day, and he could train for that day with us.

Our friendly enemies, the Vikings and the Scramblers, had let it be known around the county that the SVRC's winning ways were about to end. Both

clubs sent a representative to the Thursday night meeting of the Competition Committee.

They had a right to be there; our August road race, as Len had planned it, was to be limited to drivers from the three clubs.

It was the Solvang representative who asked for a ruling I didn't understand until later. He wanted to know if the *owner* or the *driver* of an entry had to be a club member.

Len said, "We haven't decided yet. Aren't all your drivers owners of the cars they drive?"

"They were Sunday," the man said. "I just thought it was a ruling that should be made clear." He paused. "Whit Chapman isn't a member of your club, is he? But he drove his cousin's car."

Len said, "His cousin isn't a member, either. That wasn't a limited race. Come on, you're planning something, some kind of protest, aren't you?"

The Solvang man shook his head innocently, his expression bland.

Bill Burnette said, "Why don't we vote on it now, Len? Then our Solvang friend can go ahead with whatever shenanigans he's planning."

The laughter was general. I was watching the Ventura representative, and I saw him glance at the Solvang man and I thought the look they exchanged was secretly gleeful. *They're planning something together*, I thought. *They mean to make it legal when they clobber us.*

Bill Burnett glanced at me and winked. Then he turned to the others and said, "We're wasting

words. What's wrong with a decision now? I move that the *owner*, or the *driver*, or both would be limiting enough for this race."

"Word it more clearly," Len said, "and I'll put it to a vote."

It was worded and voted on and passed, either the driver or the owner of any entered and qualified car would need to be a member of the Vikings, the Scramblers or the SVRC. It would be a closed meet.

When our out-of-town guests had left, Len Aberg asked, "I wonder if those Scramblers are planning a surprise for us?"

"I think they both are," Bill Burnett answered. "I heard a rumor this morning. I didn't check it, but I heard Ken Stiles might drive for the Viking team, and Glenn Allis for the Scramblers."

"Now, why?" I asked. "Ken's from Monterey and Glenn from Pasadena. It doesn't make sense."

"They have friends in both clubs," Bill told me. "Well, they won't be driving the big cars. We don't have enough of those for a field in the three clubs."

Len said, "I've got it! I'll let Whit Chapman drive my car."

Bill shook his head slowly. "I think Whit's had it. I talked with him yesterday."

We all stared at Bill. Len asked, "What do you mean—he's *had* it? Had *what*?"

"Racing," Bill answered. He put a finger to his throat. "Right up to here. His car's a wreck, and

his dad says he doesn't want another sports car."

Juan Arragon said, "He mustn't quit now. He can't quit now. Later, but not now." He looked around at all of us. "And I'm not thinking about the club. For his sake, he can't quit now."

I nodded in agreement.

Bill said, "Since when did you two become psychiatrists?"

"We've gone through it," Juan said, "and seen others go through it. What happens to Chapman when there's no competition, no challenge?"

Bill sighed. "I don't know. And I don't think you do either. He's at an all-time low right now and he doesn't want to talk with *any* of us."

We got into a discussion of the fencing, then, and the subject of Whit Chapman was dropped. Bill had told me Monday that Whit would be eligible to join the club on August eighth. Our closed club meet took place two weeks after that, but it didn't seem to be the time to ask Whit Chapman to join the SVRC.

Most of the regulars at the filling station were taking their vacations in August, so Lin and I worked like beavers the early part of that month, and we didn't have much time to practice in the Porsche.

The second week in August, Whit Chapman came in for gasoline. I won't mention the make of the car he was driving, but it was about as lethargic an automobile as Detroit produces.

"Not *you*," I said. "Not you in *this*!"

He smiled weakly. "It's my mother's. She has another and she doesn't drive this one much. What's wrong with it?"

"We both know," I said.

"It's a little sluggish," he admitted, "but what difference does that make? Automobiles were designed to take passengers from one place to another. This does that."

"Cut it out!" I said. "The Jag was wrecked, eh?"

He nodded.

"You made a gutty decision that day," I said. "You were ten feet tall that day."

He said nothing, staring at the concrete of the drive. I thought he looked uncomfortable.

I said quietly, "It's none of my business, but you were designed for better transportation than this. You're the best driver I've ever seen *anywhere*."

He looked up, smiling diffidently. "Even at Oklahoma City?"

"That's not driving," I said. "Drags are ninety per cent car and ten per cent driver. The wrench pays off at Oklahoma City."

"Ward Trenton," he said, "you don't believe that and neither do I. But thanks for the try." He paused. "I've just taken a little vacation from racing. I'll probably make it permanent."

"Would you do me a favor during your vacation, then?" I asked.

He studied me doubtfully. "What kind of favor?"

"Well," I explained, "you once told me your first car was a Porsche."

"It was. It was the same model you're driving now."

I took a deep breath and the big chance. I said with forced casualness, "I was thinking we could take a tour of the track together this week, and you could show me your line through the turns, and your technique. I don't expect you to drive it any faster than you want to. You won't be racing; you'll be teaching."

He hesitated for seconds before he said anything. I had a feeling he didn't want to do this. But finally he said, "Okay. But I'm not running that course at anywhere near top speed."

"I wouldn't expect that," I said. "Thanks, Whit. Maybe I'll learn enough to keep from being lapped by Stiles and Glenn Allis."

He nodded, only half listening, his eyes thoughtful.

chapter thirteen

CLEVER, wasn't I? From Four-forty Trenton to king of the also-rans, and now I was tricky Trenton, trying to get Chapman back where he belonged, in a sports car on a racing course.

My motives weren't much clearer to me than they were to Chapman. I could tell myself that I wanted him to be a whole man again, to come back to the trade where he was so skilled. I could pretend that he needed the club more than the club needed him, but could I be sure that that was the *honest* answer?

When Lin came to relieve me at three o'clock, I told him about Whit and my proposition.

"Do you think he can improve you enough to make you a threat against Stiles?" Lin asked.

"I don't know. Any improvement is welcome. And I wasn't only thinking of myself. It puts him back where he belongs. You should have seen the oxcart he wheeled in here today."

Lin sighed. "You're a meddler, brother. Remember, you're not Whit Chapman's father."

"So all right! He can drive slowly and teach me. He's old enough to decide if he wants to race again after that."

"Yes," Lin said quietly. "He was old enough to decide he needed a vacation, too. But I won't argue with you. You could be right. You often are."

The way it was shaping up, Juan was about the only man who thought as I did. It was still three hours until dinner time; I drove over to the garage to see if he was working on his MG.

Juan wasn't there; he was at his uncle's machine shop this afternoon. But Pete was at the garage working on the car, and he told me it would be ready to roll tomorrow.

"We'll see you out at the strip," I told him. "We'll be trying out the bug, too. Lin's put in some new plugs he's excited about."

"Great," Pete said. "You can show Juan a few of the finer points of this game."

"I'll be taking a lesson," I told him, "from Whit Chapman. Juan can listen in."

"Chapman—? I heard he was through with sports cars."

"Don't believe everything you hear," I said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

If I were to believe Lin's watch, and I had to, my own confidence had been diminished after I had skidded off the course in my second race at Ventura. It wasn't logical to expect that Whit Chapman's gen-

ius was going to rub off on me. But by riding with him, studying his style and his strategy, perhaps I would get an insight into the winning technique and bolster what confidence I had left.

Great drivers are born, but good drivers can be made. And, with Lin's wrench giving me a slight edge in equipment, it was possible a little improvement in my technique would make me a competitor for Stiles and Allis.

Lin worked the next morning, but would get a ride out at noon with Flip Donovan. I went out to the strip around ten-thirty. Whit was already there, talking with Bill Burnett.

Bill said, "Why don't we appoint Whit our coach? Then we can *all* improve."

Whit winked at me. "My client list is limited to champions and former champions."

"I have a few cups," Bill said.

"I saw 'em," Whit admitted. "They're small cups. However, if I can find the time later, Bill, old friend—" He went over to his mother's ponderous sedan to get his helmet.

Bill said quietly, "You got him out here, didn't you? You're getting cunning in your old age, aren't you?"

"He belongs out here," I said, "with his *friends*."

"Okay," Bill said. "Let's hope it works out for the best."

Whit came back with his helmet. "I'll take a few laps alone, first. I want to get the feel of the car. All right?"

"She's all yours," I said.

He climbed in, started the engine and drove off. Bill watched him disappear out of sight around the first turn and then looked at me.

"Do you have a watch on you?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "But I don't think we'll need it. Driving is one thing—but racing—? I think he's through with racing."

From the direction of the highway, now, a car was making its way along the narrow road that led to the pits. It was an MG, it was Juan.

As he came to a stop next to us, Bill Burnett said, "Welcome, stubborn secretary! Where's your bet?"

Juan said easily, "If I had any money left, I would have bought one. But every dime I own is riding on these four wheels."

"All or nothing," Bill commented. "Juan, it's good to see you back."

Bill had been grinning, but Juan's face was grave and his voice solemn. "It's good to be back."

The Porsche went by, just loafing, and Juan squinted. "Isn't that Chapman?"

"That's Chapman," Bill answered. "Our leader here conned him into his Porsche."

"Good," Juan said. "Great! We'll show those Vikings we're still the cream of the county."

"He's not going to be racing," Bill explained. "He's here to show Ward how that Porsche should be driven."

"Sure he is!" Juan climbed from the MG. "Bill,

you're an honest man, and that makes it hard for you to understand our sly president."

Bill smiled. "I understand Ward, all right. But I've known Whit Chapman since he was eight years old, and our president has simply taken on more than he can handle."

Into the grandstand turn, the Porsche seemed to be moving a little faster. Coming up behind it was one of the Ventura Fiats, moving briskly. The Fiat went by him ten feet past the turn, but the Porsche's speed didn't increase.

When he came in two laps later, Whit said, "The only resemblance between this Porsche and my old one is the model number. Man, this car is *right!*"

"I have a genius brother," I told him. "He could turn that sedan of your mother's into an automobile. Ready for a spectator?"

He nodded, and I climbed into the seat next to him. He said, "On the first trip, I'll show you the line I'd use. It's a little different from the line I used in the Jag, but about the same as the line I followed in the Lotus."

He didn't add any more comment, and I didn't ask any questions. I kept my eyes on the road ahead as he showed me his path through the turns and the approaches to the turns. I saw him straighten that S-curve into one long stretch. He did it all in slow motion and made it seem like a different course.

As we finished the first lap, he said, "And now

for landmarks. How and when you use them will depend on your speed, but I want to show you how your perspective on them can keep your line true and can signal your brake and shifting points."

I said earlier in this story, somewhere, that the SVRC boys had advanced to the sixth grade in sports-car driving. Those few laps with Whit Chapman put me into high school. He had shown me the importance of imagination in race technique, something I hadn't needed in the drags.

But Stiles and Glenn Allis were far beyond high school; I doubted if even Lin's wrench could make up the gap.

At the end of the third lap, I said, "And now how about showing me how it's done at high speed?"

He smiled and pulled into the pits. "You're not fooling me, Ward." A pause. "But thanks for trying. If you keep improving, you won't need me."

But you need us, I thought. And though I felt that was the truth, I didn't voice it. It would sound pretentious.

There were a lot of boys practicing today, and Mr. Calvano had courteously opened one of his refreshment stands. Lin came out in time for lunch.

We ate with Whit and Bill Burnett and Terry and Flip. Flip told us that Stiles would be driving a Ventura Porsche, Glenn Allis a Solvang Lotus. He knew the owners of both cars.

Bill Burnett said, "Allis was practicing here yesterday in that Lotus, but I haven't seen Stiles around."

Terry said, "Maybe he doesn't figure he'll need the practice against bush leaguers like the SVRC."

Bill winked. "Wait'll he runs into that new Ward Trenton. These hot-shots are due for a surprise."

Everybody laughed except Whit Chapman, including yours truly, though my laughter might have been a bit forced.

Whit said, "This much I know—there won't be a car in the field tuned as well as that Porsche of Ward's is. That's a real sweetheart."

When the others went back to pick up their second hamburgers, Lin asked quietly, "What's this joke about the *new* Ward Trenton—?"

"I had my first lesson this morning," I explained, "from Whit. He certainly pointed out some angles to this business it would have taken me a long time to learn."

"He couldn't possibly teach you enough to beat Stiles, could he?"

"Not if everything else was even." I grinned.

"But don't forget that you've given me an edge with your wrench. And if we take enough seconds and thirds, we can still outpoint the opposition."

We intended to use the point system the SCCA used for its championship ratings, with ten points for a first place, eight for a second, and six for a third. The number of finishers earning points would vary according to the number of entries which started the race. Eight entries would extend the point scoring to fourth place, ten entries to fifth-place point earning.

With Stiles and Allis driving for our competitors, the Vikings and Scramblers had some first-place finishers cinched. There was no point in trying to tell myself I was ready for *those two*, even with the Porsche at her peak.

But if I could take a couple seconds . . . ?

Lin said, "What are you dreaming about?"

"I'm not dreaming; I'm planning strategy." I looked out to see that the course was practically deserted. I said, "How about putting a watch on me to see if I've improved?"

"Let's go," Lin said. "We'll never get a better chance."

I took a trial lap first, trying to remember all the things Whit had told me. And then Lin clicked his watch and I poured the coal to the bug.

It was my best lap; I knew that. Even before I pulled into the pits, and Lin confirmed what I already knew, I realized that Whit's imagination had shaved at least two seconds from my best previous round.

When I came back to the pits, Lin said, "It was good. It was your best. You averaged around eighty-three. That's good enough to beat most of them."

"But not good enough to beat the best. I'll improve."

"Will you improve enough to beat the best?" Lin asked.

"Points," I explained patiently. "All I'm worry-

ing about now is getting points. It isn't only first place that pays off, you know."

"I know," he admitted. "It's just that I can't see Ward Trenton trying for anything but first place."

"I'll try for it, always," I told him, "but be happy for any place that earns the club points. You're being cynical, brother."

"Factual," he corrected me. "How about those plugs? Notice any difference?"

"No. But Whit must have. I don't think we can make that car any hotter and still stay within the rules. From here in, it's up to me."

"There's a whole afternoon ahead of us," Lin said, "and you can use the practice."

I took a dozen more rounds that afternoon, trying to put into practice the theories of Whit Chapman, trying to learn what he already knew and develop the touch he already had.

Both Ken Stiles and Glenn Allis showed up before the afternoon was gone. Stiles practiced in the Ventura Porsche, Glenn in the Solvang Lotus. Neither of them tried for any record laps; they were getting the feel of their cars.

The Solvang redhead was there in his Triumph, and I kidded him about needing Glenn Allis to beef up his club's entry list.

"It wasn't my idea," he said seriously. "I fought it. Once the boys learned Chapman was through with racing, they thought this would be a smart way to come out on top."

"And then the Vikings talked Stiles into driving one of their cars," I pointed out. "So what was gained?"

The redhead looked less serious as he grinned. "Well, maybe not much. But it seems plain right now to any sensible person that the San Valdesto Roadster Club is due to take a bad licking. It's possible I voted the wrong way on Glenn Allis."

"Don't count your points before they're won," I told him. "We're not coming here Sunday to lose."

chapter fourteen

EVIDENTLY the lack of confidence I had shown at Ventura was a temporary lapse. Or perhaps the schooling of Whit Chapman had given me a new attitude. Whatever the reason, I turned in three laps on successive days, that final week, which were new personal records.

They were considerably slower than Whit's lap times in his cousin's Lotus in our first road race, but that Lotus had been a better-prepared car than the Lotus Glenn Allis was using on Sunday. And Whit was a better driver than Allis.

Ken Stiles had a Porsche that was really hot. It hadn't been this much of a car under the hands of its owner; I could guess that Ken and his brother had tuned it themselves. They were excellent mechanics.

There was some resentment in the club about the two outsiders our competitors had entered. Stiles was from Monterey and Allis from Pasadena.

Len Aberg went around muttering to himself, and Bud Ellinger thought we had made a mistake by not insisting that all drivers had to be club members. But, as Bill Burnett pointed out, this would not have solved the problem; both Stiles and Allis were eligible to join the Scramblers or the Vikings. There were no geographical restrictions on memberships.

"But the fact that they haven't," Bud protested, "should prove that this is all a trick to beat us."

It was. But it was a legally acceptable trick and I couldn't blame them too much. We had dominated the drag racing for so long in the county, our competitors were bound to be a little bitter. And bringing in names as lustrous as Stiles and Allis was certain to attract spectators. This helped the club treasury and our patron, Mr. Calvano.

Sunday morning, while I waited for the car to be checked, I went over to the main refreshment stand to say hello to him.

"On the house," he said, and set a foaming mug of root beer on the counter.

"Thank you. We should have a good day. They're starting to come in already."

He nodded. "What pleases me more is how you old-timers have integrated the new boys. And what pleases me more than that is seeing old bull-headed Juan Arragon back with his friends."

I laughed. "Juan couldn't leave us for long. Who else would understand him?"

He sighed. "True, true— He's an obstinate, stubborn man. But a *man*, a whole man."

"And a good one," I agreed.

A silence. I could tell there was something on his mind. Finally, he said, "I was wrong about that Chapman boy, wasn't I? I heard about that accident he had at Ventura. He showed a lot of courage, I heard."

"He did."

Mr. Calvano poured himself a tall glass of root beer, and said quietly, "I understand he doesn't want to join the club."

"That's only half the story. There would be no point in his joining; he's decided he no longer wants to drive in competition."

There was a longer silence this time, and now I had the feeling Mr. Calvano was thinking of words he hesitated to voice. After almost a minute, he said carefully, "That's a decision, of course, he would have to make in his own mind. He shouldn't be pressured."

I could feel myself blush. I said, "I haven't pressured him."

"Did you maybe try to trick him?"

I thought for a second before saying, "Maybe. I guess the thought occurred to me. My motives aren't always clear, even to me."

"Nobody's are," he said. "I'm glad to see you realize it. Ward, any motor sport based on speed is committed to risk and danger. It's not like talking

a man into taking up chess or checkers again."

"I know." I took a breath. "He's so—so *great*. It seemed like such a—a waste—"

Mr. Calvano didn't answer. He had made his point; he wasn't a man who belabored the obvious. We talked about other things, including our chances today, and then Lin came over to tell me the car had been checked and approved.

The course was deserted. Though I had practiced enough during the week to make it seem almost laborious, I took one more four-lap spin before lunch. I felt as ready as I was likely to get; my success today, or lack of it, would depend on luck and the power of the opposition.

A little before noon, Ken Stiles ran his borrowed Porsche through four laps of trail that had the crowd neglecting its lunch. It was a brilliant display, and I didn't feel quite as ready as I had after my own trial run.

I was standing near Bill Burnett's pit while this show was going on, and when it was finished I looked over to see Whit Chapman watching me. He was smiling.

I shook my head.

"He can be beat," Whit said.

"He has been," I admitted, "but not by me. Well, he won't be in any of the consolation races. *There* is where I'll garner points."

"And we can win a lot of seconds," Bill said. "All is not lost; let us think positively."

Why not? It was all in fun. The world would

not stop turning if we didn't finish a single race today. To my mind, the tragedy of Whit Chapman not doing what he did so well was more important than the success or failure of the SVRC this afternoon. But Mr. Calvano was right; nobody but Whit could decide what was best for him.

Flip Donovan was going to keep a chart on the points scored for each club. We would have a race-by-race reckoning of our position.

We had a novice race to open the meet, ten laps of competition for drivers who had not previously entered a meet or finished in the first four cars in any race.

Our greenest ace, Juan Arragon, would start in this one. Juan is a man who bottles up his emotions until they are ready to explode, and his nervousness today was only apparent in his stolid silence. He talked only to Pete and stayed in his pit until it was time to line up on the grid.

I hadn't noticed Juan in any of his practice runs; in the drags he had been a stormer, a rubber-burning, all-out competitor who often bottomed too early.

He carried some of that technique over to his new sport. This much I'll say for him, though he didn't win us any points in his maiden effort, he was the driver whom the crowd watched.

His braking and shifting, his line through the turns were not the smoothest in the field, but those enormous wrists of Juan's gave him a steering strength not enjoyed by men of normal size. He

simply manhandled that MG around those turns like a mule skinner in a wild display of sound and fury.

It would have been dangerous driving for anyone of lesser strength. But there was never any doubt in the pits that Juan had everything under control. He usually did. He finished seventh in a field of eight and came into the pits *smiling!*

"I beat him," he said. "That Austin-Healey from Solvang—I beat him. I thought he had me there for a while—"

"There were six others in the race you didn't beat," Pete reminded him gently.

"One at a time," Juan said. "That's the way I'm used to winning. I'll work my way up."

Pete looked at me and sighed. Juan looked at me and winked. And then he admitted, "To tell you the truth, I'm gloating because I finished the race. I never thought I'd make it, the way those tires were screeching."

"You could have slowed down," Pete suggested.

Juan shook his head. "That Scrambler would have beaten me if I'd slowed down."

A Scrambler finished first, a Viking second, in that opener; we finished third and fourth for a total of ten points to tie the Scramblers, two points in front of the Vikings.

And now for the second race, a qualifying ten-lapper, the first three cars would be eligible for the feature. Ken Stiles would be in this one, but not Glenn Allis. The Solvang boys were playing it

smart. Glenn couldn't hope for much more than a second, with Stiles entered. And Stiles would be automatically eliminated from the next qualifying race if he won this one. So Glenn would have a firm chance to take a cup in that one—and ten points.

There would be three qualifying races. That meant that nine top drivers would wind up in the afternoon's finale, the feature twelve-lap race. That could be a Stiles-Allis benefit.

We were getting ready to line up when Whit came over. He said, "Don't crowd Ken too early. If he doesn't get early competition, he has a tendency to loaf in the later laps. Your best chance to take him would be then."

I sighed. "Psychology, too, we need? Have you realized I may *never* get close enough to crowd him?"

Whit smiled. "The possibility occurred to me. I'm trying to think positively. You've improved a lot, Ward."

The starter must have thought so, too. I was in the front row, with Stiles and the Ventura Fiat. In the row behind, Terry McGovern was paired with the redhead from Solvang. Any competent handicapper would have to make Stiles the odds-on choice in that group. The third row was made up of cars not nearly as ready as those first five.

The Porsche Stiles was driving was newer than mine and tuned almost as well. The Ventura driver had looked very good in his trials here this week. Though I didn't lack confidence, a realistic ap-

praisal of that first-row threesome didn't indicate the SVRC would earn any easy ten points.

We were in front of the pits, and in Bill Burnett's pit I could see Whit Chapman looking out at all of us, and it seemed to me his expression was wistful. This was his world; he was bound to miss it.

Next to me, Lin said, "Luck." He patted my shoulder and went back to the pits as the starter examined the field.

Stiles looked over and winked. The Fiat's driver called over to me, "A cinch eighteen points for the Vikings. This isn't a drag."

"You might be right," I admitted. "Your ignition okay?"

He frowned. "Why shouldn't it be?"

"I thought your car was missing in that trial you made this morning. Is that the way it always sounds?"

"Huhl!" he said.

The flag was raised now. It dropped.

The bug moved out with the thrust of my right foot, gaining an immediate edge on the Fiat, losing nothing to Stiles. But Stiles had the inside lane for the first turn and I had to give him clearance. By the time we had slid into the short stretch, he had ten feet on me and the Fiat was riding my deck.

I decided at that moment to try the strategy Whit had mentioned. I moved over to give the Fiat room and cut my pace enough for him to move by without strain.

In my mind, that Fiat was no match for Stiles in the hot Porsche. My hope was that Stiles would learn that soon enough to make him overconfident.

What I didn't realize was how closely Terry and the Solvang Triumph had been trailing the Fiat. Both of them went past me before I had regained my earlier pace. My strategy had backfired; I was now riding fifth in a field of eight.

With a field of eight, only the first four cars would earn points. I would need to improve if I wanted to help the club. There were nine and a half laps to go, and the three cars behind were well behind. I played it cool, biding my time.

By the time we gunned into the longest straight-away, Ken Stiles was well out in front and winging. Terry McGovern was already challenging the Fiat, and the Solvang Triumph trailed the pair of them by less than ten feet. He had a thirty-foot lead on me.

The Porsche was perking without strain; there was still plenty of waiting horses I could summon if the need arose. Ahead, Terry moved past the Fiat before they both went into the sweeping right turn that preceded the hangar hairpin.

Based on the trial times he had established this week, Terry would be a more serious threat than the Fiat's driver to the dominance of Ken Stiles. I upped the Porsche's pace and began to gain on the Triumph ahead.

He must have seen me in his mirror, but he

didn't meet the challenge until I began to crowd him on the grandstand turn. Here, as we powered out, he poured the coal into the Triumph.

The red bug answered the challenge, responding to my summons for those horses that had been waiting. We moved past the Triumph and into fourth place only fifty feet short of the pits.

For a lap, he dogged me while we gained on the Fiat ahead, and then, almost imperceptibly, the superiority Lin had worked into our engine began to pay dividends. With three laps behind us, the red bug had a ten-length lead on the Triumph.

And almost directly ahead, the Fiat was within challenging distance. It was my turn to play hound to the Fiat's hare. He was a good boy and his car was right. For two laps he made my case seem hopeless, maintaining his edge on every turn and through every stretch. We gave the fans their money's worth in those two torrid laps.

On the third trip around, as we came into the longest straightaway, I decided it was now or never. I knew I had a higher top speed, and this was the only place to take full advantage of that edge. I put the Porsche up to her straining limit and hoped I would earn my lead before we had to slow for the widest right turn.

I made it. *We* made it, the red bug and I. As I downshifted for the hangar hairpin, we were in third place and going away, well within challenging distance of Terry's twin-cam ahead.

I didn't make my move on him right away. I

wanted to wait until I could see how much of a lead Stiles had on Terry before I alerted either of them to a threat from behind.

I saw it in the long stretch, again; Stiles had a quarter-mile lead on Terry. It was a lead he maintained all through that long run. Now, I made my move.

Terry had the horses and the desire; he didn't have the line Whit had shown me. Before that long stretch had rolled around again, the bug and I were in second place and hoping for a miracle.

The miracle would involve our getting by the great Ken Stiles with only two and a half laps to go. He had been maintaining a constant gap over Terry; it was much shorter now. I went right up to the precarious limit of my skill and my machine.

He had been loafing, as Whit had prophesied he might. There was still a lap and a half to go when I came up behind him in the long stretch once more.

We had the momentum and that was enough. We went past him well short of the turn as Ken's Porsche reacted too slowly. There was no time to feel smug, however; he was less than three feet behind when we came out of the wide turn into the hairpin.

I led him out of it and had the torque to actually increase our lead in the next stretch. The miracle seemed almost within reach as we blasted past the wildly waving pits. Leading Ken Stiles with a lap to go—it was worth pasting in the memory book.

I'll be immodestly frank; I thought I had him. I thought I had learned enough from Whit and gained enough from Lin's mechanical skill to take the great Ken Stiles in my third road-race outing.

It was an illusion he dispelled on the first turn past the pits. I went in fast and slid wide and he had the line he wanted. He moved to the inside lane and bottomed.

It was a daring chance and it took a great driver to bring it off. He made it.

And though I chased him desperately through that final lap, he made up enough on the turns to compensate for what I could recover through the stretches. He led me by twenty feet all the way to the checkered flag.

Reason told me that losing by twenty feet to Ken Stiles was nothing to be ashamed of. But emotion was in charge when I came into the pits a lap later; the taste of defeat was sour in my mouth.

"You were great," Lin said.

"Thank you."

"Eight points," Lin said. "And Terry brought in six more. That's fourteen points for the club. We're running away with it."

I nodded, saying nothing.

Whit Chapman came over from Burnett's pit. "You almost did it. You were great, Ward. Another year and you'll be unbeatable."

"Thank you," I said, and climbed from the car. I took a deep breath. "I thought I had him. I was *certain* of it."

"He's good," Whit said. "He's about as good as there is on the Coast. He's a champ." He came over to grip my shoulder. "Don't glower. Let me buy you a Coke."

"I'll buy," Lin said. "Let's go."

At the stand, Mr. Calvano was sitting near the griddle, and he waved for us to come over. There, he said, "I don't think I've met this new boy, have I?"

I introduced Whit to Mr. Calvano. Though Whit didn't know it, that made him an ace, whether he joined the club or not. Mr. Calvano was admitting an earlier error in judgment. He doesn't have to admit many; he is our unofficial membership committee and his evaluation of our prospects has rarely been wrong.

Over in the pits, the Vikings were gathered around Ken Stiles, and they all looked happy. We had pulled fourteen points out of that race and Ventura only ten, but they had reason for their optimism with four races still to be run.

I saw Whit glance that way and smile as he drank his Coke.

"What's funny?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "I was thinking of Ken. He's a real competitor."

"He certainly is," I agreed. "If our red bug hadn't been twice as hot as his car, he'd have lapped me."

Whit shook his head. "Your car isn't that much faster."

"But it *is* faster."

He nodded, still looking down at Ken, and I could guess he was wondering how *he* would have done in the bug. I didn't push it. Mr. Calvano was right. Whit would have to make his own decision.

We looked pretty big after that second race, with twenty-four points to the Vikings' eighteen and the Scramblers' fourteen. But, as I said before, there were still four races to be run. And Glenn Allis hadn't even raced yet.

Glenn was entered in the next one, not open to Stiles. For the first three laps of that ten-lapper, Bud Ellinger's Sunbeam and Glenn's borrowed Lotus were never more than twenty feet apart, and Bud actually led for about a quarter of a mile in the long straightaway. I had a feeling that Glenn was saving some horses, but this didn't detract from the fine race Bud was driving.

About five of us were watching from the roof of the old machine shop, and Terry McGovern said, "That Ellinger gets better every race, doesn't he?"

"So do you and Ward," Pete Arragon said. "We'll beat these boys next year."

Terry turned to stare at him. "Next year—? We're way ahead of them on points right now!"

"Temporarily," Pete admitted. "But I've been checking the entries in each race. It doesn't figure, Terry. Allis is a cinch in this one, and that's ten points, and—"

"Allis," Terry argued, "is being beat *right now* by Bud."

Pete smiled and shook his head. "That was two seconds ago. Take another look."

In the big right turn, Allis had moved past Bud and was now calling on those horses he had been holding in reserve. That Lotus seemed to jump out of the hangar hairpin and it came blasting down toward where we were standing.

The cream will always rise, I thought. *A champ is a champ*. Bud had probably nourished for a second the same hopeless dream I had cherished when I was leading Ken Stiles. But we weren't ready for these major leaguers—not *yet*.

Allis went sailing on, and Bud unwisely tried to match his pace. If he had finished second, Bud would have picked up eight points for us, enough to keep us in the lead. In trying to follow a pace he wasn't ready to handle, he spun out on the grandstand turn.

Four cars went past him before he could regain the course; he was now riding sixth. He finished a little better than that—he finished fourth, to give the SVRC four points.

That brought our total to twenty-eight points. But the Scramblers had finished first and third which gave them thirty points, and the Vikings had picked up a second to bring their total to twenty-six points.

None of the fields would be larger than nine cars, so twenty-eight points a race would be the ultimate in points scored. From our early lead, we had fallen into a shaky second place.

As we came down from the roof of the machine shop, Juan said, "I guess we have some lumps due us. Let's be good losers and gracious hosts."

"Let's not," I said. "Let's only be gracious hosts. But this game isn't all foot, you know. A little intelligence helps, too."

"You mean Bud Ellinger and—"

"He should have taken second," I agreed. "We don't have to tell him that. I'm sure he knows it by now."

Juan glanced toward Bud's pit and said, "If he doesn't, he's being told."

I followed the direction of his gaze to see Whit Chapman talking very earnestly with his Princeton friend. Bud Ellinger was getting the *WORD* from an expert.

I won't bore you with the details; the fourth and fifth races were hectic, seesaw battles, and we weren't humiliated, after all, despite our rivals' aces. We came up to the feature twelve-lapper in third place, I'll admit, but we were only four points out of first place. And miracles occasionally happen.

Either Ken Stiles or Glenn Allis was a cinch to win that feature, *unless* something went wrong with one of their cars or they overestimated their tractive potential. It was a small *unless*, but what else did we have?

Flip Donovan said, "A third and fourth would only give us ten points, and what better hope have we than that?"

"A first and fourth," Bud Ellinger said, "would give us fourteen points. And *that* could do it."

"Who wins us the first place?" I asked him. "Look around and name me one."

"You," he said. "I guess you're our leader once more, Ward."

I shook my head.

From his seat at the table next to Flip, Whit Chapman said wistfully, "I wish I had a car. I wonder if my cousin's Lotus qualified for this. Did it, Flip?"

Flip shook his head.

I said, "I've got a hotter car than that for you, if you're serious. I thought you were through with racing."

"I thought so, too," he said. "But I'm not. I'm not sure about my confidence, but I know I'm going back to racing."

"Take the car you know," I said. "Take my red bug."

He stared at me in disbelief.

Bud Ellinger said quickly, "No. Let him take mine. You and Whit, that's our team."

"Take the car you know, Whit," I repeated, and looked at Bud. "And you use your head this time instead of your foot, and we've got a chance."

Bud had taken a third in the fifth race; his car was qualified. He looked from me to Whit and back again.

I said quietly to Whit, "Let's go, champ. They're getting ready to roll."

"I'm rusty," he said. "I could cost us points."

Us, he had said. He was an unofficial member of the SVRC right now. I said, "So cost us points. It's not the end of the world."

Whether he cost us points or not, he belonged in the best car we had, and that was the bug prepared by my brother.

There was a murmur through the crowd as his name was called over the PA system. From the Ventura pits, Ken Stiles looked up, smiled and waved. Win or lose, Ken lived on competition, and he was looking forward to that feature even more, now.

We found a helmet to fit our boy, and he eased into the seat of the Porsche. He smiled up at me, "If we lose, it won't be the car. I don't suppose you want to sell it?"

"We'll talk about that later, when you join the club," I said. "Right now, let's think about Ken Stiles."

"And Glenn Allis," he added. "Well, they're old friends; I don't mind losing to friends."

"Yes, you do," I said. "Good luck. This car has finally found a driver it deserves."

I left him, then, and went up with the others to the roof of the machine shop.

Mr. Calvano had joined the group up there. He said, "We have a chance now, haven't we?"

"We had a chance if I drove it, too," I said.

He chuckled, saying nothing more.

Out on the grid, Ken Stiles, Glenn Allis, and Whit

Chapman made up the first row. That was a trio nobody could expect to find in a club meet; these expectant fans were getting triple value today.

Mr. Calvano said, "Juan and Whit both realize the club is the important thing. And you do, too, now, don't you, Ward?"

"I always did," I said. And then asked, "Didn't I?"

"You must have," he said. "This proves it." A pause. "It's hard to judge a man when he never loses."

The starter's flag flashed then, and the feature of the day was under way.

In my opinion, our Porsche was the best-prepared car in that field, and Whit was the finest driver.

For the first two laps, however, that double superiority was in doubt. Whit hung back, while Glenn and Ken put on an early personal duel that established a new lap record. Whit still hung back, and Bud Ellinger moved past him into third place.

Mr. Calvano said, "He's playing it cagey, isn't he?"

I nodded.

"You don't mind my needling you, do you?" he asked gently. "I guess you know a little needling is good for you, Ward."

I smiled. "All the boys know that. Look at Whit—he's starting to make his move."

Whit had taken two laps to regain his feel of the red bug, and now he was skimming past Bud and picking up ground on the leaders.

"He's going to win, isn't he?" Mr. Calvano said.

"He's going to win," I said. "And Bud has a good chance to finish in the first four. That sews it up for us, Mr. Patron With A Needle."

He chuckled.

That's the way I figured it, and that's the way it happened. Glenn Allis spun out to let Bud finish third, and Whit won by a clean hundred feet. The SVRC was still king of the county.

And, as Whit made his appearance lap with the checkered flag, Mr. Calvano said, "One more needle, Ward. Your brother's wrench made you a winner, and now it's done the same for Whit Chapman."

I had an answer for him this time. I said, "Mr. Calvano, that's the point *I* was trying to make. *We're all brothers!*"

Aren't we?

William Gault needs no introduction to auto-racing enthusiasts. Road-Race Rookie will take its place with Thunder Road, Drag Strip and Dirt Track Summer as one of the best books on a dangerous but fascinating sport.

About the author . . .

WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and lived there until he moved to California more than ten years ago. He tried his hand at all sorts of odd jobs before settling down to the difficult one of being a professional writer. Mr. Gault is the author of a number of successful mystery stories for adult readers.

Young readers know him for an outstanding series of books on auto racing and other sports. Among them are *Mr. Quarterback*, *Through the Line*, *Thunder Road*, *Drag Strip*, *Dirt Track Summer*, and *Two-Wheeled Thunder*.

The Gaults — Mr. and Mrs. Gault and their teen-aged daughter and son — live in Santa Barbara, California.

